

Highlander: Pariah

Preface:

About 5 months back I started writing a fiction involving all-original characters, set in the Highlander 'verse. I'm not exactly an obsessive fan, and I've only seen a scant few episodes of the television series. So I feel obligated to mention that the only continuity this fiction follows is my own. No established characters or concepts from the movies or series are used herein, save for perhaps the notion of "Watchers."

I mention this because the Pariah story should be viewed ostensibly as an alternate universe, and you should look at the story being told with fresh eyes, as if the movies had never happened and the story were being told over from the beginning.

As a second preface, I don't consider this fiction to be vulgar or crude, and certainly not pornographic. However, we are talking about a fiction in which the characters' ultimate goal is to decapitate their opponents. There will of course be violence and occasional strong language. I'm no expert, but I'd probably rate it in the PG-13 to R range, depending on your sensibilities.

It's been a while since I've updated the fiction because of schoolwork, but the work has not been abandoned, and I feel this is a really fun story to tell. I hope you enjoy it.

Prologue: Just Drinking in the Rain

The Spice Rack Seattle, WA October 22, 2004 – 11:30 PM

Drinking alone is one of the worst things a professional alcoholic can do. It keeps one in the house, away from friends, away from help, away from supervision. Such sessions usually degenerate into an angry, self-pitying depression that ends in unconsciousness and accidental eruptions from at least two of the major three evacuation portals of the human body. Jack Donahl preferred it that way. He didn't feel like talking

to anybody. He didn't feel like being cheered up. All his mates were either dead or rotting in some damned English prison. His arthritic knees ached in this close, freezing weather. He was sitting in the rain. And tonight of all nights, he felt allowed to get bollixed and reward himself with some self-pitying depression.

Donahl reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a collection of little liquor bottles that he'd grabbed from the hotel minibar on his rush out the door. He laid aside his shotgun microphone—mindful to keep it pointed towards the topmost church window-- and knelt down on the rooftop of the building, spreading out the bottles. He sifted through them looking for whiskey, and eventually settled on a runty portion of Jack that probably cost five bucks. He didn't care; he'd set this day aside specifically to get steamboats, because Quint wasn't going anywhere.

He spun the cap off the bottle one-handed with practiced ease and raised it slightly to the shrouded moon. "Dia is Muire duit," he said roughly and drained the bottle. He exhaled a low breath and propped himself in the corner of the restaurant rooftop. Another bottle. He'd never had Crown Royal before, but he drank that too and hated it. He didn't really read the third one's label-- figured it was American vodka, which is why it tasted like water. Just when he was getting nicely numb, the sound of someone climbing up drew his attention to the opposite end of the roof. Donahl eased his headphones off and draped them around his neck. A head poked its way over the threshold and the man swung his leg up.

"Jack?" the man called. He rolled up at last and stood, dusting his pants off. He was a roundish fellow that would have looked at home shelving books. Not fat, just unathletic. His hairline was desperately retreating to the back of his head, to the point where even a comb-over, last bastion of the balding man, had to be abandoned. He dressed like a physics professor, and an unimaginative one at that. From head to toe, his clothes were nondescript, dullish brown and gray department store fare.

"Ah Christ," Donahl swore. "Not tonight." He scooped up a pair of high-tech binoculars and plastered them to his face, surveying the road under night vision. He looked for Quint; maybe he'd slipped out early for once while Donahl was getting rat-arsed and not looking.

"Calm down, Jack," the man said, stepping over near Donahl's impromptu pub, "My boy's not here yet." He knelt down and plucked up a bottle. "I came by to see how you're doing."

“Oi can’t hardly stand this puy Yank she yeh call whiskey, Vaughn,” Donahl grumbled. He lowered his binoculars and sat back down on the wet rooftop. The rain picked up, and he huddled miserably in his corner. “Oi’d kill for a proper glass o’ Guinness. Might as well be drinkin’ tap water.”

“You okay?” Vaughn glanced over at the church across the street.

“Celebratin’, son, celebratin’.”

“Sure looks that way,” Vaughn observed at the state of the rooftop. “Quite a setup you’ve got here. Microphone, video, starlight...”

“Pullin’ me plum,” Donahl griped, punctuating his frustration by spinning the cap off another bottle.

“What?”

“Doin’ nothin’. Wankin’ in the bloody rain. Oi’m peachy, Jason, absolutely peachy. ‘Bout yeh?”

Vaughn reached into his coat and produced a silver flask. It looked expensive, and was engraved, although Donahl couldn’t read the script in this light. “The other guys chipped in and got you this, Jack. I know it’s a little stereotypical considering you’re Irish and all, but ehm...well, happy birthday.” Donahl blinked in surprise and reached out to take the flask, and was surprised at its weight. He unscrewed the cap and wafted it under his nose.

“Oh thank God,” Donahl breathed, his eyes rolling back in relief. “It’s been weeks, mate.”

“Thought you’d like a reminder of home,” Vaughn smiled. “What are you now, a hundred?”

“Seventy, ya twit,” Donahl belched. But he seemed in good humor. “But thank yeh far the gift, eh.” A melancholy look crossed his face, and Donahl hung his head. “Ah well. Drink wi’ an auld man?” But Vaughn pointed his thumb over his shoulder and shook his head negatively.

"I gotta go. Take it easy, all right?" He waved good-bye and headed back towards the other side of the rooftop. A sharp ratcheting click at his back caused Vaughn to freeze in his tracks.

"Not here yet," Donahl said with frost in his voice.

"What?" The rain picked up. It was heavy and cold, and for a long while there was silence between the two men. Silence, except for the drumming of water all around them and the low rumble of distant thunder. The rain wouldn't last much longer; the sky was already beginning to clear. But here, it persisted. Here, the weather seemed to match the foulness of Donahl's mood and what was about to happen.

"My boy's not here yet," Donahl repeated. Vaughn said nothing but raised his hands up. "The hell's that meant tae mean, Jason?" He stood up and pointed his gun at Vaughn's back, still holding his flask in his other hand. "Yaer boy's followin' you for a change?"

"Jack, come on, Jack," Vaughn said, turning around slowly. Donahl pushed his nine millimeter handgun into Vaughn's shoulder and made him face the other way again. "You don't need that. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Tell it tae me bollocks, Vaughn," Donahl snapped. He tried to put it all together through a haze of terrible Yank liquor. "Yer boy's coming here? Followin' yeh? And you..." Donahl shook his head in disbelief, "How did yeh even know Oi'd be-- Yeh followed me here? Tae get tae--"

"He...he just wanted to talk to Quint, Jack. Please. He just wanted to talk." Vaughn was a terrible liar. Donahl had heard much better bullsh**e from much harder blokes than this.

"I can hear steel on steel over me headphones," Donahl snapped, "On holy ground." Donahl looked over at the church and cursed himself for being so dense. He tightened his hand around the gun and willed his head to clear. "You muppet. And yeh knew this would happen, eh? An' yeh wouldnae come up here unless yeh were plannin' to make sure I snuffed it, too. If all yeh wanted was Quint, Oi'd never have laid eyes on yeh. So why," Donahl hissed, "are you here? Eh?"

Vaughn turned his head to look back, but Donahl poked him in the spine with his gun again. They both could hear the sharp ringing of swords clashing against each other from the headphones around Donahl's neck, even over the sound of the falling rain. They listened for a while. "Jack..."

"Yeh dinnae have the minerals tae kill me face tae face like a civiloized murderer, did yeh?" Donahl spoke softly, his voice dripping with disgust. "I wasnae t'always a Watcher, ye dumb yella she. An' like a puy, yeh've gone an' poisoned an auld man's whiskey."

Vaughn stammered, "Jack, I swear it's—I just thought—" He trailed off as Donahl reached over his shoulder and smacked the flask against his chest.

"Drink it, Jason."

"Jack!"

"Drink the whiskey or eat a bullet, mate."

Jason Vaughn didn't move, except to shiver, and once again time seemed to slow down. The only sounds that could be heard were the high-pitched tinny sounds of a distant sword duel through a pair of headphones, and the deep rumble of the weather all around them. They could see each other's breath in the cold, hear the stress of every inhalation. For a long time they dwelt on the silent, common knowledge that only one man was going to walk off this rooftop.

And then, it all stopped. The rain weakened and dribbled to a halt. The sound of swords and microphone static ceased. All that was left were heartbeats that throbbed loudly in the thick, wet air. Shots rang out, but they came from the church across the street. Vaughn ran for it, primal fear pushing him onward. He crossed the distance of two rapid strides before more shots rang out, and Vaughn pitched wordlessly onto the rain-slicked roof—a shot through his neck, and another in the back of his head. He slid across the water a bit, twitched his leg, and laid still.

Donahl was already packing up his kit when a cacophonous shattering sound drew his attention across the street. The top of the stained-glass window of the church exploded outward as a man dove through it.

Amidst a shower of lead, blood, and colored glass that twinkled like fireflies in the streetlight, he fell from the second floor and crashed with a sickening crunch onto the stone stairway in front. Donahl cursed himself again for being such an old fool and shouldered his satchel. If Vaughn was here, that meant— Donahl looked from side to side and clenched his fists, trying to figure out what to do. Quint wasn't going to make it.

Quint limped to his feet, collapsed, and drug himself forward into the street. His gait was awkward and his forward progress was made in a lurching step that barely qualified as a limp and was more a crawl. He rolled off the curb and into the street, oblivious to the little orange car that had just cruised through a green light at the intersection. Donahl squinted his eyes, a dark expression etched on his face. The car's tires shrieked on the slick asphalt, a vacuous gravelly sound as the bald tires hydroplaned. The car fishtailed, swerved one way, then the other as the driver overcorrected, and hit Quint off-center in the knees. Quint was blasted clean out of his shoes. He bounced off the hood, spiked his head into the windshield, sailed straight up in the air, and landed on the side of his neck and collarbone as he fell across the edge of the vehicle.

Donahl looked away. He walked over and retrieved his flask, and emptied its contents on Vaughn's body. "Drink's on you, mate."

Prologue: Sanctuary of the Faithless

University Christian Church Seattle, Washington October 22, 2004 – 11:30 PM

The city looked abandoned from where Quint stood atop a flight of narrow stone stairs. "Abandoned" was perhaps not the right word, more accurate to say that the city had a vacant feel to it, but still a life of its own. Quint could see no one walking along the street, and it seemed both comforting and frightening that, in a city such as this, he was alone. Occasionally a car would pass, a low rumble and a sharp glare of light made potent by the glimmer of rainfall that quickly faded into the night. Quint was alone, but the city was alive; the passing vehicles made him imagine the city breathing.

He leaned his head back and let the hood of his coat fall. The icy bite of the rain on his skin made him grimace. Quint loved the rain. It felt fresh and cleansing on his face. The sound of it soothed his nerves and loosened the tightness that often gripped his neck. He loved the reflection of city lights and neon on black puddles. Some might say that it poisoned Quint's mood, that his personality was dark and dreary. That it gave Quint some angsty schadenfreude to revel in a phenomenon that causes misfortune and trouble to

so many others. Quint had thought about that, but decided the only thing about rain that really filled him with angst was the notion that humanity had finally found a way to screw even that up.

Angst. Ah well. If the shoe fits. Quint wasn't any part of the solution either, so who was he to judge? Leave it to the beret-wearing rich girls on algae diets, and the long-haired guitar-strumming guys trying in vain to score with them via the sensitive-guy route to chain themselves to trees. Quint spit his gum out in the nearby planter and drove such inane thoughts from his mind. He was just upset because his Walkman crapped out last week.

Quint slicked his hair back with a lazy swipe of his hand, and turned away from the street. He pounded on the door a couple of times and waited. After a few moments, the door swung open. A black man on the light side of thirty leaned against the doorjam, wearing after-hours business casual: a button-up gray shirt with the collar loosened and charcoal-colored slacks. He had closely-trimmed dark hair, already graying at the edges. He had the carriage of a man without cares and who had long ago stopped bothering to suck in his gut.

"Didn't think you were gonna make it," he said.

"Traffic. Good to see you again, Bri."

Brian smiled warmly and swung his hand out. "You too, Dex." Quint gripped his wrist and they shook hands. "Come on in. I've got pizza rolls, and Trump's about to fire that one guy. I love Tivo."

Quint rolled his eyes and almost reconsidered entering the church, but did it anyway. "You're a minister. Can't you denounce reality TV or something?"

"You just don't deal well with change," Brian said over his shoulder as he led the way to his office. "I got American Idol cued up. One of those audition episodes where everyone's terrible." Quint made a guttural sound.

"I'm just going to sit in the hall down here. You have a good time though."

“Sorry man,” Brian turned around. “You looked sour. Thought I could help a little. I know you don’t want to talk—”

“I don’t,” Quint said in a harsher tone than he meant to. He corrected his tone, “I just want to be alone for the next 30 minutes.” Brian nodded sagely, looking as if he wished he could help. But he didn’t intrude. That’s why Brian was one of the best friends a man like Quint could have. He seemed to understand that Quint had a lot of mileage on him, and most of what he kept bottled inside wasn’t anything he wanted to feel better about. Brian walked down the hall.

Quint turned towards the main aisle and hesitated. “Pizza rolls?” Brian laughed and kept going. “Evil.”

Quint waited until he heard the door to the reading library close before he walked down the aisle. The hall was dimly-lit, the pews swathed in splashes of color from the stained glass windows behind the altar and chancel. The chancel was a walkway that stretched behind the pulpit, elevated above the congregation by two small flights of stairs on either side. It allowed the choir to file in from the left, stand in front of the windows and sing directly to the congregation, and exit to the right. It also kept the young acolytes from sleeping during the sermon, because thirty booming voices stood behind them at all times.

He stood in the middle of the aisle and closed his eyes, once more enjoying the sound of the rain against the roof and windows. He dropped his duffel bag heavily onto a nearby pew and concentrated. The acoustics were wonderful. The air hummed and throbbed as if it were special here, or magical, and the hair on his arms raised sharply at the sheer bliss of what he was hearing. He fell to his knees in humility. He swore long ago that he would never bow or bend knee to anyone ever again, except one person. And so, here he knelt.

“It won’t end. You know that, Quint. It never ends. I won’t be protected.”

Quint’s fists clenched in his hair. He bent low, pressing his head to the floor.

“I won’t beg. I am asking you now, and that should be enough. Make it clean. Then walk away.”

His teeth ground audibly, and his eyes clenched shut, but tears still squeezed through and fell.

"It's all right. If I could have chosen anyone, it would have always been you."

Quint gasped for breath as a shock coursed through his body. His spine prickled as he felt a new presence approach. Someone like him. Unconsciously, he reached for his bag until he remembered where he was. Holy ground. The doors swung outward, allowing a rush of frigid air to flood the church.

"Love in a hut, with water and a crust, Is - Love, forgive us! - cinders, ashes, dust." Silhouetted in the doorway stood two men, side by side. The tall one had light, almost white hair that laid awkwardly on his head and drifted in the wind. He wore a trenchcoat, buttoned up against the elements and a red scarf wound around his neck. His eyes were narrow and full of malice, and though Quint had never seen him before, it looked as though the man held some deep hatred toward him.

The other man was relatively smaller, but had a body that carried much more density. Quint could tell he was well-built, and he wore his tailored business suit as if he were born to be in one. He had thin, round glasses balanced atop his nose that reflected the street light harshly into the room. His face was severe and stern, with immaculately-trimmed facial hair shaped into a Van Dyke-style goatee. An umbrella was propped over his right shoulder. Quint turned to face them, his eyes red and puffy, glassed over with fresh tears.

"Dry your eyes, Quintus. O dry your eyes, For I was taught in Paradise To ease my breast of melodies," the man in the suit teased. He stepped inside, flanked by the larger man. The speaker closed his umbrella and leaned on it; Quint noticed that he carried a noticeable limp.

"You don't get to call me that," Quint said, his tone murderous. He instinctively knew to hate this man, and it wasn't just because of the poetry. "And we're closed for a private function."

"Love has made you predictable, Quintus," he continued. "For whom do you mourn?" Quint scowled and stepped forward, anger coloring his face, but the taller fellow in the trenchcoat stepped in front to shield the man behind him. Quint restrained himself, but the talky fellow persisted in provoking him. "Mortal? Immortal? What would she say to you, Quintus? 'I long to believe in immortality. If I am destined to be happy with you here-- how short is the longest life. I wish to believe in immortality-- I wish to live with you forever'."

"How short is the longest life . . . I wish to live with you forever."

Quint's jaw sagged open, and he staggered backwards in horror. He knew. It was a quote from Keats, "Letter to Fanny Brawne." It was what she used to say, in dark warmth together. And when she said it, Quint felt needed. He felt important. When this man said it, he felt violated. The breath leaked from his body, turning acid in his throat. "Tell me how you know that," he threatened. He will suffer. "Tell me what you want."

"Hear ye not the hum, Of mighty workings?" he quoted. Keats again. Who was he? The man pointed his umbrella at Quint. "The days of peace and slumberous calm are fled. Our time draws short, Quintus. And so much depends on you."

"Answer me!" Quint cried out. He could hear the door to the reading library open, and Brian wandered out. Quint cringed and called with a broken voice, "Brian, go back into the library." He pointed a finger at the man who quoted Keats, his tone moderated into a cool assurance of imminent death. "Answer me."

"You have fallen so far from your greatness, Quintus." This Keats man seemed genuinely saddened. "There is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. And what a hell you must struggle in. But you mourn, you stagnate, you rot. You live, and yet you are more dead than most who walk this earth. You keep wishing to undo time's inexorable grind forward. As though a rose should shut and be a bud again. She has broken you, Quintus. And we know her name."

The tall man finally spoke. "La belle dame sans merci," he said, in natural French. With that, the Frenchman opened his coat and calmly withdrew a masterfully-wrought sabre and gestured to Quint with it as a challenge.

"What are you doing?" Quint's eyebrows shot up in surprise. The Frenchman advanced quickly. Quint rushed to grab his bag, but he barely had time to grab the shoulder strap when his opponent was on him. Quint dove past an overhead slash as he dove into the pews. He gripped his duffel bag in his hand, but had no time to search in it for his weapon. The Frenchman showed no quarter, no hesitation; he hacked into the pews as Quint scrambled to regain his feet. "This is holy ground, you ah*!"

Keats laughed with a sardonic amusement dripping from his voice, "Is there such a thing for a faithless man?"

Quint screamed as the Frenchman's sabre lashed across his collarbone. With mortal fear hastening his steps, he dropped his bag and scrambled to the altar. He fell over it, and sensed his enemy swiftly behind him. He rolled aside just ahead of another chop that rang woodenly off the altar. Quint snatched up an iron candlestick and managed to parry a slash meant for his belly. Quint hooked the Frenchman's swordarm under his armpit and drove his palm into the man's nose. The Frenchman stumbled backwards, clutching at his bleeding face. Quint hurled the candlestick into his groin.

He half expected the Frenchman to drop his sword after that, but he was only momentarily set back. Quint looked around for a weapon. His bag was out of reach. He ran to the pulpit. Nearby stood a pair of flagpoles: the American flag and the state flag of Washington. Quint wrenched Old Glory free from the base and tore the fabric away. The Frenchman regained his footing and bared bloody teeth at him as Quint spun the pole as a quarterstaff. Quint held the pole low across his waist, his hands spaced far apart at opposite ends.

The Frenchman rushed in with a furious yell. Quint had already sized up a flaw in his technique; he was a devastating fighter because he psyched himself up for gruesome murder when entering battle. His blows were all power, balanced by basic technique. Anyone caught unprepared could be easily overwhelmed, as Quint had been. But anger and power lead to mistakes. As the Frenchman charged, Quint flung his makeshift staff forward as if it were a pool cue. The poor lighting hindered depth perception, and in an instant, Quint was holding the staff at the extreme end like a sword. His nose crashed straight into the eagle that capped the flagpole, and he almost somersaulted backwards from the impact.

His opponent regained his feet, his face masked in blood that still gushed from his ruined snout. With another cry, he waded back into melee, his sword never at rest. Quint managed to parry the attacks, but his enemy was a brutal swordsman who had seen combat. He could tell. Quint was not suited for this type of combat, and he was being driven backwards steadily.

He dropped low as he parried a slash at his legs, and the Frenchman followed up with a high downward-arching hack. Quint parried high over his head, the staff parallel to the ground. He clove the pole in half, and the sword collided with the ground. Quint seized the advantage and pummeled the Frenchman about the head with the broken ends of the pole. He clubbed him in the head with brutal rights and lefts, hoping to knock him out long enough to run or find a real weapon. He planted his pivot foot, and was spinning around to follow up with a roundhouse kick to gain some distance, but the Frenchman rolled under it and

hacked upwards into Quint's hamstring. Blood flowed hot down his leg and Quint seethed in transcendental pain. He felt his muscle ripping and tearing against the bone. He had to keep moving. He leapt forward on his good leg, gaining as much distance as possible. His enemy's tactic was ruthlessness and overbearance.

"Dex!!" It was Brian's voice.

Quint looked over to see Brian standing in the aisle. Oddly, he could see no sign of the man who quoted Keats. Quint had lost track of him. Brian had Quint's duffel in one hand, and one of Quint's swords in the other. It was small and deceptively compact, but sturdy and swift in design. Brian reached high over his head and hurled the gladius in Quint's direction. It rang off the far wall and clattered to the carpeted floor. But it was close enough. Quint hobbled over and scooped up the old sword, and in one motion narrowly managed to parry the Frenchman's lightning onslaught.

Quint was overwhelmed, and even though his technique was the best he'd ever known it, the Frenchman was too fast, and Quint was barely ambulatory. He fought a retreating duel, dragging himself up the stairs to the chancel that overlooked the entire church. To his left, the rain rattled against the stained glass like a snare drum. The Frenchman pushed him back with a thrust. Quint tried to get in a counterattack and slash at his opponent's sword arm, but the Frenchman stepped forward and kicked Quint in the wounded hamstring. Quint screamed and fell backwards, nearly blacking out from the pain, and the Frenchman followed up with a brutal thrust into his belly.

Quint's sword fell from his hand and he doubled over. The Frenchman laughed shakily at his victory and kicked the gladius to the floor below. "Il ne peut y en avoir qu'un," he intoned, his mouth full of blood. So much for tradition.

"At the risk of sounding unsportsmanlike..." Quint groaned as the Frenchman raised his sword to finish the job. Quint rolled aside as the deathstroke fell and withdrew a handgun from his coat. He pushed it into the Frenchman's ribs and squeezed the trigger several times. The Frenchman shrieked in pain and fell forward. "...you started it."

Quint fell to his back and twisted away as the other man's body collapsed nearby. Quint considered taking the sabre, finishing him off. He swore under his breath and crawled away in an attempt to regain his feet. He heard a gurgling sound behind him. The Frenchman was back on his hands and knees. He gripped his

sabre once more and was starting to stand! Quint allowed himself a moment to gape in amazement at the man's persistence and resiliency, and it almost cost him. The Frenchman rushed to his feet and charged. This man was a pit bull, and faster than Quint expected.

Quint put all the strength he had left into a desperate jump. He fired his gun into the window and crashed into it, praying his weight would be enough to carry him through. It was. Quint sailed through the frigid night air amidst a shower of colored glass and icy water. He felt like he was falling for a longer time than he should have, and then he plummeted hip-first into a sharp edge of concrete. His leg snapped with an audible crackling noise of broken celery. His knee was wrenched unnaturally to the side, and he felt his kneecap dislodge. His hamstring was healing, but the fall reopened the wound with a vengeance, and blood rushed anew from the gash.

Forward. He had to keep moving. His thoughts now were of escape. He clutched at his belly and threw himself forward using the power of his one good leg, one push at a time. He barely knew he was in the street until he heard the sizzle and slide of hydroplaning tires. Just as he regained some semblance of a standing position, he turned his head at the sound and was immediately blinded by twin headlights

He remembered flying. He did not remember landing.

He smelled motor oil. His vision was tunneled into narrow pinholes that threatened with each heartbeat to wink out of existence. He saw a yellow stripe and a flat patch of ancient chewing gum in breathtaking detail. His leg screamed. His arm felt like it had been crumpled into a ball. The side of his head was wet and sticky, and a knot throbbed horribly. He wished someone would answer the phone. He felt gravel still embedded in his face. Someone gathered him up and put him somewhere soft. It smelled like old hamburgers and hand lotion now.

"Take him someplace safe. Please. Please, stop panicking. Just drive." Brian? Was that Brian? Something heavy thumped into his lap, made of cloth. His duffel bag. Brian?

He heard a woman's voice, too, arguing. Afraid. He had to get out of here, but he could not remember why. He pointed his gun at the source of the voice. "Drive..." he croaked in a freakish voice. His ribs were broken. He felt shards of bone floating in his lungs. "Driiiiive or I'll ...I'll kill you."

He couldn't breathe. He tried to speak, but only blood leaked from his mouth. His vision was fuzzy, grainy, then gray.

"How short is the longest life . . ."

Then black. Then gone.

Chapter One: The French Connection

Bellarmino Hall Dormitory, Seattle University

Seattle, Washington

October 22, 2004 – 11:55 PM

"It's nothing like you see in Lone Wolf and Cub," Quint muttered with his lips pinched around a cigarette. With a trembling right hand he tried to work the disposable lighter, but his right was his off-hand, and Quint was already well into shock. His left hand was occupied, stuffed into his coat pocket so his shattered arm didn't hang uselessly at his side and alarm the woman on the other side of the bed. Before he embarrassed himself too much, she finally reached over and lit the cigarette, exhaling her breath out loudly enough to convey a mixture of anxiety and frustration. Quint grunted in gratitude and breathed in the smoke like an asthma patient's first truly free breath after an attack.

"Ton of s*** in the way," he continued hoarsely as he fumbled at the tab to a can of Wicked Ale, "not the least of which being the spinal column. It's just..." Quint trailed off as he saw the woman turn a paler shade and shake her head in disdain. She lit her own cigarette and Quint felt compelled to speak again. "I've never seen one go off clean before. Not in one shot."

"Look," she started, but Quint was on a roll and cut her off.

"Especially not with that Roman or medieval-era stuff. Most of the time they're not even all that sharp. It's all about leverage and weight. Impact." He was losing her. She looked away, out the window to the nighttime skyline. "You nail a guy with a 4-foot length of steel and he's

gonna be f***ed up. Broken bones certainly. Internal bleeding something fierce most of the time. Might even lay your skin open pretty good if they do catch you with a sharp edge. But those samurai movies? Bulls***." Quint paused for breath, a drag, and guzzled half the can before continuing. Shock blurred his sight and turned his voice into a dreamy monotone, and the concussion had ceased hurting and turned into a dull, numb throbbing in his head and the rising bile in his gut.

"Usually takes, a half-dozen...nine. Hell I'm not even really counting...makes me sick. It's never clean. Never clean." Quint finished off the can and stared into the blackness within it, as if it contained some Nietzsche-like abyssal insight. He was really just trying to block out the pain, or at least blunt it.

"Is this supposed to impress me or something?" the woman said, looking confused. She was probably trying to work out exactly how much trouble she was in. Whether or not Quint was going to kill her. She fiddled needlessly with her hair-tie and re-tightened her ponytail in back. Her hair was red, Quint thought, but for some insane reason she had chosen to dye it to black and streak it with violet highlights. Who would dye red hair? Two long strands of bright purple hair were carefully-arranged to dangle over her face—the only hair not ratcheted back in a ponytail to what seemed to Quint to be a painful degree.

She looked like she was running the tail end of a second shift, clad in a sweaty mockup of formal usher's attire from a movie theater. It was stained with sweat, salt, and butter that would never wash out. A disgusting greasy cummerbund hung off her waist with an ill-fit. She was pretty, Quint thought, but seemed mired in a phase to deny natural beauty in favor of shopping at Hot Topic and the novelty of damaging her hair with Kool-Aid. She wasn't pretty now, but nobody is after a double-shift and a car accident. He decided not to judge; she won the beauty contest by virtue of not having to pick broken glass out of her face.

Quint snorted out a laugh that soon turned into a wide grimace as his broken ribs howled in furious protest. "I'm sorry," he winced, reaching for another can, "I'm not trying to sound like I'm hardcore on the off-chance it'll turn you on." He paused. "Does it?"

"No."

“Worth asking.”

“Look, I’ll take you to the hospital,” she bargained. She seemed desperate to get out of this, and Quint didn’t blame her one iota. “They can help you. You can’t stay in my dorm room. There’s no room, and you’ll bleed to death, and it’s filthy here, and —”

“It won’t—” he interrupted her, and searched for the words before restarting, “I don’t need a hospital. By morning all that’ll be left will be scars. Would be faster but someone hit me with their Pacer.” The woman shook her head and started to protest, but he quieted her with a consoling wave. “It’s cool. You saved my life back there.” Quint leaned back and reached into his coat. He withdrew an old .38 as nonthreateningly as possible and checked the ammunition. He swore under his breath, spun the chamber, and closed it against his leg.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” Quint murmured, “I don’t care what you saw, because you don’t know what you saw. You can tell anyone you like once I’m gone. Just not tonight. And your dorm is fine.”

The woman looked about at the wasteland her dorm was. The bed dominated the tiny room, and the scant floorspace that was available was taken up with a mini-fridge, piles of clothes, a bookshelf, a television that had seen the Carter administration, and a pile of pizza boxes that almost resembled a shrine to our lord and savior, Papa John Himself. “It’s a s***hole,” she finally declared.

Quint popped the second can of ale with an agreeable nod. “Yup. Terrible underfoot. Cramped quarters. Small. Low ceiling. Beautiful.”

She hoisted a single eyebrow at the sincerity of his tone. “What’s that supposed to mean?” But Quint’s eyes widened in surprise and he seemed to tense up all at once, like a cat prickling up for a brawl.

“Get in the bathroom,” Quint groaned out as he climbed back to his feet. His muscles and bones protested and threatened to go on strike. “I don’t believe this guy.” The woman started

to voice a question when a booming voice sounded from outside, loud enough to shake the door.

“Quint! Temps de mourir, tricheur!”

The woman spun around towards the door and ran for it, shouting for help. She flung the door open and pointed into the room. “You have to help me!” she shouted, “This guy—”

A tall man shouldered the door open, nearly knocking it off a hinge. He wasn’t large and muscular, but instead lean and tough. He was unshaven, and his light hair was in disarray. There was a manic wideness to his eyes that filled Quint with the feeling that there was true hatred behind his actions. He put his hand up against the woman’s face and ushered her violently backwards. She tripped over her old laundry and fell into the bathroom anyway. The Frenchman spun his sabre by the hilt, the mercury lights outside glinting off the steel and Quint’s own blood that decorated it. It was an impressive Napoleonic-era affair, probably an infantry officer’s sword.

“Did you see that?” Quint motioned to the bathroom in disbelief. “She totally sold me out.”

“Maintenant, Quint.” The Frenchman demanded, pointing at Quint with the end of his sabre. Quint could see blood staining the front of his clothes almost completely, and the sticky red footprints he left in his wake. Three small holes perforated his trenchcoat, highlighted by the wet blood glistening in the anemic urine-colored light. The last two wore trenchcoats as well; it served as one of the only wardrobe options useful to conceal samurai weaponry. Being seen with such things tended to make people think you were either insane or from a Renaissance Festival. If there was a difference.

“Come on, Pepé Le Pew, I already kicked your a** once tonight.” Quint said with a weary false bravado. He wasn’t ready for this. “I got a TV. Let’s watch Voyager and drink tranya.”

The Frenchman moved into the room to come after Quint, lowering his sword to waist-level. He took a high step over the pile of laundry in front of the door and stumbled. He kept rushing in and made an off-balance stab at Quint, who threw himself against the opposite wall away from

the point of the sword. The sword punched clean through the cheap powdery drywall, and nearly sent the Frenchman flopping straight onto his face. Quint made a grab for the sword arm, but the Frenchman was surprisingly agile. He rolled through his fall, wrenched the sabre back against his body, and made another upward thrust towards Quint's face. Quint twisted aside and downward, dropkicking his opponent squarely in the face. The bed broke Quint's fall, and he sprung back to his feet.

The Frenchman crashed against the back wall of the dorm and hurried back to his feet. Quint gained some distance by backing up near the door, withdrawing an old, notched marine KA-BAR knife from his coat.

"What did I do, man," Quint smirked. He went over to the bathroom and pulled the door shut just as the young lady within was just regaining her feet. Her protests were only barely muffled by the cheap door. "Is this over Freedom Fries? I had nothing to do with that." The Frenchman either didn't understand or didn't care. He shouted and rushed forward again. He raised his sword, presumably for an overhead chop of some kind, but the long blade clunked into the ceiling. He abandoned this attack and tried to thrust once more, but the wasted attack bought Quint more than enough time, and he was already on the move. Quint moved in and clung tight to his opponent, powering him up against the wall.

Quint smashed his head into the teeth of his taller opponent and jammed his knife up under his armpit. He did this twice, and then a third time. The Frenchman's long weapon was useless here, and Quint didn't concede the range needed to use it effectively. The sabre clattered to the ground as Quint rendered the sword arm useless. In desperation, the Frenchman tried to punch Quint, or to grapple him in a headlock, but Quint was relentless. He hooked a leg around the Frenchman's knee joint and twisted, wrestling him to the floor. Quint pushed his knife against the Frenchman's throat.

"Why?" he shouted. He grit his teeth and dug the blade into the man's skin. "Pourquoi?"

"Vous devez mourir," the man wheezed.

"Laissez-moi faire!"

The Frenchman tried to speak through a lung full of blood. He gagged and retched, and blood bubbled over his teeth and down his chin. He clenched his eyes shut and sprayed from his mouth as he shouted "Jamais! Vous allez causer notre perte."

"What?" Quint was incredulous, and the Frenchman used the brief moment of surprise to lunge up. He clubbed Quint in his injured arm and tried to pull him over with it. The effort was feeble, and Quint drilled him between the eyes with the reverse end of his KA-BAR. Almost knocked out from the blow, he still resisted with all his strength, even when Quint replaced the knife at his throat. "Is this the way you really want this?"

The Frenchman's eyes bulged as he attempted to cling to consciousness. His fists clenched at his sides.

"Don't make me." Quint dug the knife into the man's throat. "Don't make me do this, goddammit."

"No!!" the college girl screamed from the entrance. She rushed forward and threw an arm around Quint's throat. She pulled at him and grasped his knife hand. Quint's weight shifted to the side, and with a roar of agony and defiance, the Frenchman lurched up and retrieved his sabre. He swung with his last remaining strength, aiming high.

Quint stopped resisting the woman's pull and instead flung his weight backwards, which sent them both tumbling to their backs. The sabre arced high and wedged itself solidly into the opposite wall. Quint squirmed free of the woman's grasp and plunged his KA-BAR into the Frenchman's throat, just under the right ear. It went in smooth and silent, eliciting a low, sticky gurgle from deep in his chest. Quint ripped the knife to the left side. This was not smooth, and it was not silent. The woman made no sound, and only watched on in pale horror, transfixed by the grisly act.

Quint scrunched his face so that his eyes were almost closed, and he wrenched the knife away. For a long time, the only sound in the room was of a haunting, airy bubbling and the small scratching of muscle spasms against the floor. Quint tossed the knife away and sat still for a long while. He was staring into the eyes of the man beneath him, glassed over and sightless, but still looking squarely at him. He scrubbed his hands on the man's clothes and stood. With a

sudden intake of breath, the woman plastered herself against the wall farthest away from Quint as possible.

He went to his duffel bag propped against the bed and nudged the buckled flap open with his foot. He stooped over and carefully withdrew a weathered hatchet. He stared at the tool for another long moment. "You know what's weirding me out more than what I'm about to do?" he said, his tone wavering. He turned his head to look at the horrified young woman with tears blinding his eyes. "I never learned French."

With that, Quint bit his lip and almost threw himself back on the floor. He chopped at the Frenchman's neck with grim precision. After four blows from the hatchet, Quint flung the hatchet next to the knife on the floor with a sharp ring of metal-on-metal. Quint closed his eyes. "It's never clean."

The air suddenly went dry, and Quint felt as if he had been doused with a bucket of sand. The world seemed to tremble, but it might have just been his heart's throbbing. Against all reason, a swirling wind rose in the tiny room. The stack of pizza boxes collapsed, proving that it was the world that was trembling more. The television flickered to life, and the alarm clock near the bed hummed and tuned itself to the Top 40 station. The wind calmed, and then madness was unleashed. Electricity sprayed from the wall sockets. The television image shrank to a piercing white point, then the glass cracked and the electronics within burst all at once in a spray of sparks. Smoke and the smell of charred insulation filled the room, and every light in the building burst at the same time. Unseen hands seemed to pluck Quint into the air and he hung there unsupported as a maelstrom whirled around him. Chaos became tangible and dove into Quint's eyes and blasted through his spine. He thought he was screaming, but he could hear nothing aside from a shrill ringing in his ears.

Quint's hair felt like it was burning, and gravelly chunks of shattered and powdered glass ground into his knees. His muscles felt like they had been ripped from his body, stretched, abused, and stitched back onto his bones with fishing line. But he stood. His vision was grainy and washed-out, and his heart seemed to have a hard time coping with his sudden transition to standing. The woman sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring at him with an eerie, calm silence that signified she was well past her insanity limit for the week. He pulled her up to her feet. She was stiff and deadweight, but her legs dropped down heavily to the floor and she kept her feet.

"Lady." Quint said. "Hey lady." Her head jerked over to look at him.

"Kelli," she breathed.

"Come on." Quint buckled up his duffel bag and hauled it over his shoulder. He pushed her out the door, hoping that she still remembered how to run. Broken glass covered the entire block, glinting in the moonlight like fresh rainfall.

Chapter Two: Saturday Calculus

State Highway 104, about 5 miles south of Seattle, Washington

October 23, 2004 – 12:16 AM

Mamaaaaaas daw lecher babies graw up to be cowboahs...

Quint punched the POWER button on the radio with a sticky thumb. He clicked his tongue in frustration at the sight of the dark red fingerprint smudged on the console and fussed in his duffel bag for his towel. The duffel was huge and piled awkwardly on Quint's lap, and the passenger seat of Kelli's Pacer was pulled up much too far to allow him to sit comfortably. He sifted through the bag's contents with his clean hand, wrenching items aside to get to the bottom. He muscled his sleeping bag aside and his elbow smacked into the shoulder of the woman sitting in the driver's seat. She squawked loudly and cast a glare at him that could freeze magma.

Quint yanked a black towel out of his duffel bag with a triumphant laugh and scrubbed at his bloody hands. It didn't work any miracles, but the towel helped to remove the worst of the gore. He muscled his bag between the seats, towards the back. The bag bulged awkwardly and mashed against Kelli's face, completely setting her high-tension hairdo out of alignment. He started snooping.

"You said you'd let me go," Kelli mumbled, her eyes shifting back to the center line of the road.

"Holy s***, you actually keep gloves in your glove compartment. Check this out. Isotoners."

"You said—"

"I can only imagine the illness that put you inside a department store, gazing at a rack of faux-

leather driving gloves, twenty bucks burning a hole in your pocket, and made you think,' It's wrong to have that space occupied only with my registration and Hardees wrappers'."

"You said—"

"G'heh, they're still in the box, I love it." Quint held the box inches from his face and squinted his eyes to read the box by the moonlight through the window.

"Maybe I was...rebellling against the notion of such an antiquated concept as a glove compartment by being the only person alive using it as it was intended," Kelli improvised. Her leg was thumping against the floor mat in anxiety.

"I thought of that," Quint said as he opened the box, "But I don't think anyone's that iconoclastic."

"What?"

"Iconoclastic."

"Oh." She fell silent instead of asking what the word meant.

"Hey, one-size-fits-all. Can I have these?" He dangled the black gloves so she could see. Kelli sputtered and tried to insult him about four ways at the same time, and the divergent speeches crashed together in an incoherent jumble.

"What the f—I mean—you f***ing—I can't—You kidnapped—You said you were gonna let me go!!"

"No I didn't." Quint said quietly, trying not to sound like an a**h***. But he did. "Not specifically."

"A**h***," she steamed.

"I know."

Kelli rubbed her knuckles into her forehead, trying to grind some stability into her thoughts. Quint was trying on the gloves and looking completely innocent despite everything that had happened that night. His left arm was no longer mangled and broken as she'd seen it before, though his leather jacket would never be the same again. She concentrated on the road; thinking about anything else rose a panic in her.

"And they were fifty dollars," she corrected.

"Haaaa!"

"You know-- They're not mine. I got them for Stace for her birthday. She was saying--"

"Wait," Quint looked puzzled. "This isn't your car?" She looked sheepish and drummed her thumbs on the steering wheel. Quint turned away and chuckled at his reflection in the window. "So you borrow your friend's car and then run over a homeless person." Kelli started to vibrate and her skin shifted to a reddish hue. "Someone's in trouble..." Quint sing-songed.

Kelli smacked her palm against the wheel. "It's not funny, Quinn. I've—"

"Quint."

"What?"

"Quint. Me Quint. You Jane."

She sputtered again, but managed to put her train of thought back on the rails. "I don't have a car. I'm not gonna have a car after tonight because you went through the windshield," she pointed at the insultingly obvious spider web of crushed glass that comprised the passenger-side windshield. Quint self-consciously brushed glass off the dashboard, seeming to think it might score him points. "And even if you do let me live, I've got a final tomorrow that I'm going to fail. I'm in such deep s*** right now..."

"In what?"

"S***. Deep s***."

"No, a final in what?"

"Calculus." She said the word "calculus" as if it were a mortal enemy.

"On a Saturday?"

"Yes!" she moaned at the unfairness of it. "At 7:40 in the morning."

"Jesus." Quint looked awestruck at the sadism of the American collegiate institution. "You're in deep s***."

"I'm not ready to start thinking about calculus until 3 PM," Kelli griped. Quint lit up a cigarette. His calm aggravated her to no end.

"I think your professor will give you an extension considering..." Quint mused. That actually seemed to satisfy her for the moment. They lapsed into silence. Quint gazed out the window at the highway mile markers flying past. "I was never going to hurt you," he said finally. "I only said that so you wouldn't drive away." Kelli made a sarcastic noise. "Once we get to Bellingham, you can go. I promise. Oh come on..." he sighed loudly as she kept shaking her head in disbelief.

"What's in Bellingham?" she asked, but received no answer. "We headed for the border?" Again, Quint said nothing. "Fine. I don't believe you anyway."

"All right," Quint said. He balanced his cigarette in his mouth and slapped his hands against his knees. Kelli looked over. "I'll tell you why I needed you."

"A hostage," she cut in bitterly.

"No." Quint hesitated and bit his lip. He shook his head, rolled his eyes, and looked back out the window.

"What? Why?"

"I..." Quint grimaced again and threw his hands up in the air. "I haven't driven a stick in over 25, 30 years. I don't think I remember how." A smirk tugged at the corner of Kelli's mouth. "Shut up," Quint barked, and covered his mouth with his fist.

"I believe you," she announced. "I actually believe you."

"I'm so happy."

"You might be the worst kidnapper ever. How does someone grow up and not learn how to drive a stick?" Kelli prodded, and found herself smiling despite herself.

"I hitch, I take buses, I'm excellent at bumming rides, and when I must, must drive, I drive automatics. They're better."

"Oh my God," she cackled.

"They're better. I push the gas pedal, car goes forward. I push brake, car slow down. I don't have to worry about that thing and that thing..." Quint pointed menacingly at the clutch and stick shift as if they were vermin that should be eradicated at once. "I don't have to think about

it with an automatic. The technology is available, I say use it."

"You don't have to think about this!" she exclaimed. "You sound just like my mother." Quint sighed.

"At least you're calmer now," he mumbled.

"Not really," Kelli admitted. After a moment, she reached for the radio.

"Aw no, please..." Quint whined.

"I need music."

"I hate country music."

"Then shoot me, Mr. Hardcore." Kelli teased. "I'm driving, I pick the station." She jabbed the button.

*... there's always one more city
I'm on the run, the highway is my home
I raised a lot of cane back in my younger days
While Mama used to pray my crops would fail
I'm a hunted fugitive with just two ways:
Outrun the law or spend my life in jail...*

Quint leaned his head against the window and gazed out at the road, through the beautifully-shattered windshield. The moonlight caught and refracted in the angular cracks of the glass, shimmering and twinkling with a pleasantness that surprised him. Biting cold air seeped in and caressed his face, and kept his unkempt dirty blond hair out of his eyes. It felt good. He watched the mile markers again, and realized that like Kelli, he too was shaking.

*I'd like to settle down but they won't let me
A fugitive must be a rolling stone
Down every road there's always one more city
I'm on the run, the highway is my home*

*I'm lonely but I can't afford the luxury
Of having one I love to come along
She'd only slow me down and they'd catch up with me
For he who travels fastest goes alone*

His thoughts drifted. Now that Kelli wasn't talking, and Quint had run out of things to say, he didn't want to dwell on what he had just done that night. The shock absorbers on this Pacer might as well have been nonexistent, but the feel of the wind on his face and the car's jostling rhythm were almost hypnotic. And Merle Haggard was actually pretty relaxing. Not bad at all.

*I'd like to settle down but they won't let me
A fugitive must be a rolling stone
Down every road there's always one more city
I'm on the run, the highway is my home*

I'm on the run, the highway is my home...

CHAPTER THREE: A GIFT FOR CAESAR

The Palace of King Ptolemy XIII

Pelusium, Egypt

September 26, 48 BC

No starlight shone on the dun-colored city of Pelusium; the moon's gleam was smothered under a layer of thin clouds that shrouded the sky like a veil. Dexion's heart was racing. He felt as if he had led his men to flight, towards a more certain death than if they had stayed behind. Despite the clouds and the rushing breeze, the air was strangely hot and thick, as if it were a sweltering summer's day instead of midnight in fall. He was uncomfortable, and his armor was not entirely to blame for the sticky sweat that clung to his skin. He felt cornered, desperately alone, and uncertain of the future. Even when he led men into battle he felt a lesser fear than now. He feared death, but at least he knew when it might come at the end of javelin, spear, or sword. Before a battle, one could prepare himself for death. But his fate now could not be neatly symbolized by two sides of a coin: life or death. There were so many possibilities, so many ways that this day could end, that it made his stomach feel knotted and raw to think of them all.

He marched with two other centurions towards the palace of the boy-king Ptolemy XIII. The palace looked sharp and angular, silhouetted harshly against the twilight. The other centurions had left their men camped outside of the city, as Dexion had. Servants paced ahead, and some trod behind the Roman soldiers. They followed Salvius and Septimius; Dexion had chosen to come alone. Some of the servants held aloft torches, some served as porters, and there was one whom Dexion did not know, bearing a bundle of papyrus scrolls. Centurion Salvius had also insisted on bringing eight bodyguards from his own century. Dexion saw no point in this; eight men or eighty could follow but it would make no difference should a trap be laid before them.

The entire army of Ptolemy was massed here for a march. Dexion said nothing to Salvius, as it was an argument unworthy of fighting. The armsmen ringed around the group in a loose circle, and chased away any who wandered too close with little more than a harsh glare.

“We are no politicians,” Dexion said after clearing his throat, “I know nothing of courtly affairs. I fear I will wrongly offend their king through a mistake or breach of protocol I have not been told of.”

Septimius looked over the head of a servant that walked between them in the road and gave an accommodating smile. “There’s little worry of that, Dexion. I have already been inside. The king is still young. I doubt we will actually see him. Instead, all matters of state fall upon the regent, Potheinus the eunuch until the king comes of age.”

Salvius laughed and also looked back to Dexion, “I think dear Quintus believes the great Egyptian army here marches at the command of a boy no taller than my knee.”

“Warring with his sister over toys?” Septimius teased, “And making battle plans with puppets, eh?”

“I have seen worse leaders in my time,” Dexion grinned back, “And maybe a few worse reasons to fight.”

“Well spoken.” Septimius muttered with a prolonged rolling of his eyes. He gestured idly to the palace. “Have you not been told why Potheinus has summoned us to the palace?”

“I was at the shore when Salvius bade me to follow,” Dexion said, “I was watching the ships that arrived yesterday morning. At first I thought it was Caesar’s men come to slaughter us, but they fly the colors of Pompey from their masts. Nearly two days have passed and they draw no closer than a mile to the shore.” Dexion seemed perplexed once more, but soon brightened at his next thought. “Septimius, let me send a messenger to invite them here. If they too are still loyal to Pompey perhaps they fear—”

“It is Pompey,” Septimius interrupted.

Dexion’s face registered an antipathy of emotions so complex that Salvius laughed to see it. “Pompey the Great is here?”

“He is.”

“How do you know?” Dexion rushed over to Septimius’ side and turned him by the shoulder to look in his eyes, “He still lives? How do you know?”

“Because,” Septimius answered with labored patience, “he sent a messenger to the palace during the night. I told you, I was there.”

“Perhaps now with those ships and men, Pompey himself can lead us back to Rome,” Salvius growled. “Think of it: sailing with Pompey himself at the head of the greatest fleet of war Rome has ever known. If this is not all some kind of trick.”

“Ah, so now you both have reasoned for yourself the reason Potheinus calls us to his council,” Septimius praised with a playful hint of condescension. “And it is no trick. I was at the battle at the plains of Pharsalia. I recognized the man he sent.”

“Pharsalia?” Dexion pressed, “You escaped from Pharsalia? I would have never thought anyone could have escaped that battle.”

Septimius’ face was gray as he seemed lost in his memory of the battle. “Some. Some. I saw such death that day, the blood collected as lakes on the plain. No less than six thousand put to the sword, I think. I still cannot say how we were defeated; we had twice the men. We had—we had cavalry like you have never seen, Dexion. But...it was fortunate you were not there to see. It was as if we were struck down by the disfavor of the gods themselves.”

“You did not speak of this when you found us. Even so, I would have preferred to fight by your side,” Dexion comforted. “I have felt cornered, waiting here for my own countrymen to hunt me down in the name of that usurper.”

The group ascended a short stair lined with simple iron braziers and entered the palace. Septimius told the servants to await their return outside, and even Salvius left his guard behind. Only the strange one bearing many scrolls continued to follow behind them. He said nothing and plodded behind Septimius, who seemed to not notice or care. The halls of the palace were oppressively close and the air was thick with smoke and dust that seemed to hold the heat like an oven. Dexion swept a hand across his brow and saw that it glistened greasily in the harsh orange glow of the braziers. Once inside, the walls seemed to absorb the light, barren of decorations save for sparsely-placed sconces.

Septimius led the way through a curtained archway. Inside the room was cluttered with furniture and servants busied with the task of arranging them. A long table stretched across the center of the hall, around which many people stood. They were clustered into groups of two or three, all carrying on excited conversations that together made the enclosed space full of raucous noise. As the noise seemed to grow, the people found it more difficult to hear one another, and so they all spoke louder over the din, making it even more difficult to hear, and so on. The air was thick with incense to mask the stink of humanity packed inside, and the room

was poorly ventilated. Dexion's head felt stuffy and swam with dizziness for a moment as he struggled to make sense of the cacophony of voices. He squinted so his eyes could grow accustomed more easily to the relative brightness of the room.

None took notice of the centurions when they entered. They stood together at the archway until Septimius gestured to a group at one end of the table. Around this group stood two youths bearing wide fans. They both had a vacant look in their eyes, performing their menial task dutifully but also making their presence in the room as minimal as possible. Their ministrations were centered on a small Egyptian man, clothed in an ostentatiously-colored vermillion robe. He was perhaps a little more than half as tall as Dexion. The robe was loose and slight, and it clung to his birdlike features. He was a waifish sort, almost skeletal in frame. The eunuch had a disconcerting way of speaking, Dexion noticed; he had a habit of speaking to one person with his eyes fixed on another. Despite his size, he seemed a powerful man, and his eyes held much cunning and dark secrets.

The man caught sight of them from the corner of his eye and hushed the men around him with a swift swatting gesture of his left hand. Dexion was surprised to notice that everyone in the room silenced themselves soon after. The eunuch Potheinus spoke in a strange commanding voice as a child's, but with a practiced mode of projection that originated deep in his belly. "Ah, the wayward centurions!" Potheinus greeted, seeming much too pleased to see them for Dexion's tastes. "What good fortune led you to Pelusium continues to grow, eh?"

"A chance to return home," Septimius agreed. "Again I thank you for your hospitality."

Potheinus inclined his head downward in a failed attempt at modesty. "What else should I have done? Turned you away? Sent you back into the waiting arms of your enemy? Or imprisoned you?" The eunuch chuckled at his own joke. The Romans forced smiles of courtesy on their faces. "No! We all have enough enemies. We never have enough friends. Don't you think so?"

"Indeed," nodded Septimius.

"Please, sit," beckoned Potheinus. Dexion chose the chair nearest the regent that he could; Potheinus occupied the head of the table alone, save for his servants who stood to his flanks. Salvius seemed uncomfortable in the room surrounded by unfamiliar people, but sat, his eyes shifting around the table in rapid circuits. Dexion watched Potheinus closely, observing the regent's face and movements while Septimius engaged him in conversation. Dexion could tell that Potheinus was hiding something, but then, all men of his position were. He wore the smile of a junk vendor in the local market: a familial, warm smile combined with a practiced innocence. He projected the aura of a man whose only desire was to help. Dexion had seen many of his type before in Rome, but few so singularly powerful.

Most people in the room left without urging; but many of the eldest men remained to occupy the rest of the chairs around the table. Potheinus' eyes moved across the assembled council, and he waited to take a drink of wine before he spoke. "Many ships have arrived near this city: ships that sail under the banner of Pompey, once a great leader of men in Rome and the noble centurions who have joined us tonight."

"What do you mean, 'once'?" Salvius demanded, his face red with outrage. Septimius put a hand quickly on Salvius' arm to calm him. Salvius blushed when he realized his foolishness at interrupting Potheinus, and his face grew redder.

Potheinus held up his hand, as if he were holding the attention of the room fixed in the center of his palm. "I offer my apologies for my poor choice in words, centurion. But you are not aware of the true nature of things in the land you so hastily fled from. I have heard news from Rome, and rumors from men I trust. Septimius has seen, yes? He has told me of how he came to Pelusium. Pompey's defeat at the fields of Pharsalia was more than a simple loss. It shattered the head of the spear."

Septimius tried to speak, but the regent continued, locking eyes with the centurions in turn. "You told me yourself. With an army that numbered half of Pompey's, he killed thousands of your men. He routed Pompey's forces into leaderless, frightened groups. Pompey himself fled to the south, and to the sea, pursued inexorably by Caesar's men. And that is how these Romans come to us. They are the few scattered remnants that remain of a broken army. Many threw down their arms after the defeat at Pharsalia."

"We remained loyal," Salvius insisted when Potheinus fell silent, "Artorius Dexion and I led our men here when Septimius found us seeking aid. We would not abandon hope so easily."

"And there is hope," Potheinus conceded. "There is hope. But it does not lie with Pompey."

A dread silence and a darkness fell over the centurions. Dexion spoke in a low voice, and he stared at his fingers. He could not bring himself to look at the regent. "What do you mean?"

Potheinus stood up and leaned forward, resting his fists on the table. He spoke with grave honesty, casting no doubt on the truth of his words. "You were wise to leave your country, centurions. I have heard that Caesar has slaughtered his way southward towards us, killing all who took up arms with Pompey. There is no amnesty for you. There will be no prisoners. Caesar is coming for Pompey with all his fury. If you stand with him, Caesar will cut you down. You are no more than four hundred men with few supplies. Out there," Potheinus pointed towards the sea, "are perhaps a thousand. How will you stand against that? Septimius, you have seen what Caesar can do. You have seen it, yes?"

Septimius would not look at the regent. His chin trembled in an effort to keep his face expressionless. Dexion could not be sure, but it seemed that Septimius gave the slightest of nods.

“So you have refused to allow Pompey sanctuary here?” Dexion asked.

“I have granted it,” replied the regent as he turned his back on the rest of the council. He clasped his hands behind his back and walked a slow circle.

“You have granted it?” exclaimed Salvius, “But why would you do such a thing? Caesar would bring war down on you as well.”

“You swine,” spat Dexion. The centurions gaped at him in horror, and the rest of the councilmen sucked in frantic breaths. Potheinus’ face remained passive. “I know what you’re scheming. Do you not see, Septimius? Salvius? He cannot refuse Pompey and send him away. Caesar would grudge Potheinus for allowing his quarry to escape. And he cannot let Pompey stay here, for that would make Caesar an enemy, and bring his armies down on the city.”

Potheinus took a sip of his wine, his eyes reading Dexion with a cold regard a butcher might give livestock. Salvius looked between Dexion and the regent, looking afraid. “What does this mean? Dexion?”

Septimius spoke in a creaking voice, visibly choking down his rising bile. “It means we deliver Pompey into Caesar’s hands. That is what you want, isn’t it Potheinus?”

The regent thumped his goblet down on the table. “There is a world of difference between what I want, and what must be done, centurion. I invited you here so that I could help you, I swear it. Your man Dexion thinks me a liar; I can see it in his eyes. And he is wise to think so. But you are good men, and loyal. Loyal to your country. Your country. You must remember that. You do not deserve to die. I would see you live. And if you do as I bid, you shall.”

Salvius stared at the table, his pallor white and sickly.

“You will be heroes in your country,” Potheinus declared. “Honored forever. Free to return to your homes and your wives. You will save your own lives and the lives of the men who serve you with a gift for Caesar.”

Chapter Four: Breakfast

A McDonald's Parking Lot near Interstate 5
Bellingham, Washington
October 23, 2004 – 6:42 AM

Quint awoke with a phlegmy jolt as a dense weight wrapped in wax paper dropped in his lap. His eyes were sticky and blurred with sleep, but his nose was assaulted with the clashing scents of synthetic maple syrup and rotting potatoes. He smacked his eyes open and looked through the foggy passenger-side window, and saw that the Pacer was parked out behind a dumpster. He scrunched his eyes shut and coughed out a morning wheeze. His neck spasmed, and he groaned. Sleeping in the car seat was akin to medieval torture; long-broken springs jabbed through the naugahyde into his back and rear like a bed of nails.

He slapped his hand against the object on his leg, and he felt it was warm and coated in a thin sheen of grease. He raised his eyes and found himself staring down the barrel of his thirty-eight. Kelli leaned against the side of her door, looking squarely at him, her arms propped up on her knees that were drawn up to her chest. She had an amused look on her face, probably because Quint was staring cross-eyed at the weapon with fresh drool collecting on his coat's collar.

"I suppose I could have just run away while you were sleeping," Kelli pondered aloud, "Actually for a little while I thought you'd bled to death. Because of the car and all. But once I got into town I had a better idea."

"Oh no," Quint moaned. His head sank. "You're going to kill me. A McGriddle? This might actually finish me off."

Kelli bobbed her head back and forth, weighing the option of killing him, "Well that was the first thing I came up with. But then I realized you can really help me out."

"Help you?"

"Yeah. I'm not some screaming Rae Dawn Chong spaz chick you can—you can just bully around, expecting me to stick around while you joyride around the country hacking people's heads off. I've got to deal with stalker movie nerds at the theater, and student loan billth on the horizon so bad they'll throw me into a gulag when they finally realize it'll take me an ice age to pay 'em back on a teacher's salary."

Quint nodded, and wore a blasted look on his face that would infuriate a Shaolin monk, "Clearly I'm screwing with the wrong person here."

Kelli smirked.

“So...” Quint’s hands searched in the air for the rest of her point.

“So now I’ve got some psycho serial killer here with a broken leg, beat up to s***, and I called the cops from that payphone over there.” She gestured quickly to the restaurant beyond the dumpster with the gun. “I don’t pretend to know what happened at the church or at my dorm, all I know is that in a few minutes the cops get here and I can basically tell them anything I want because I got you—quite literally—red-handed.”

“I’m missing the connection to the student loans, here.” Quint looked at his stained hands and the blood caked under his fingernails. He clicked his tongue in disgust and poked his McGriddle to make sure it was really dead.

Kelli put her hand to her forehead in faux-maudlin horror. “Oh Jane Pauley, I saw the whole thing!” Quint rolled his eyes and unwrapped his flattened breakfast sandwich with the look of a man approaching the gallows. “Hey it’s not like I’m going to lie. The story’s good enough I don’t need to. I make the circuit around the talk-shows, I get a month on CourtTV while you plead insanity—and you clearly will—and if I luck out, I’m sure some network somewhere will pony up royalties for a TV movie or something.”

Quint crushed the sandwich into his mouth and mumbled through a mass of indestructible carbohydrates, “You’re handling this all really quite well. In fact,” he swallowed, “I rather unfairly sold you short. You’re a very dangerous sort. Believe it or not, more dangerous than me if you applied yourself properly. You have no idea.”

“At the moment, I have some idea,” she gestured with the gun. “Now stop with your stupid bulls***-with-a-smile routine. I know what you are.”

“Uh huh.”

“You killed that man. And I don’t even know what you were up to in that church, but you came out with blood all over you. And you had a gun in your hand.”

“It’s very easy for you to forget everything you’ve seen,” Quint frowned, “Since the only thing you care about is saving your own a**. You’re a survivor, kid. A damn good one. But in this case you’re just wrong about me. You’re just sticking your head in the sand if you’re willing to ignore all of the strange things you saw.”

“You killed that man.”

“He came after me.”

"Maybe he was a cop or something. Or..."

"Who spoke nothing but French and carried his police-issue sword. Don't be stupid. You know better."

Kelli's face flushed. She wiped her nose on her sleeve as she tried to collect a jumble of confused thoughts, but kept the gun trained on Quint. "I don't care! You killed—"

"Temps de mourir," Quint recited from memory. "He said, 'Time to die, Quint'." Kelli shook her head fiercely, but Quint continued. "When he was on the floor, I asked him why—why he was trying to kill me. I had no more idea than you. He said 'you have to die'."

"Shut up," Kelli spat, her body trembling violently as she relived the bloody ordeal in her mind. Her eyes were shot pink with extreme lack of sleep. "I don't believe you."

"I asked him to leave me alone," Quint shouted, "And he said—" Quint stopped, mouthing the words that sprung to his mind. He scratched at the stubble at his throat, and looked confused, suddenly realizing even he hadn't fully absorbed the memory of the previous night. "Vous allez causer notre perte." Quint fell silent, repeating the words to himself. He stared out his window and tapped his finger against the fogged glass.

Kelli choked out the words, "What does that mean?" but it came out airy and half-complete. She swallowed fiercely and shouted it again, her voice ringing through the interior of the car. "What does that mean?"

Quint's head whipped around, his eyes lost. It looked almost as if he had forgotten she were there. He licked his chapped lips and stumbled through the translation. He still wished that he knew what soul was shouting the words up from the hell inside him. The little voice he heard was laughing. "He said, 'Never. You will bring about our downfall.' Or...something like that. The last part is strange..."

"Keep talking," Kelli dared him. "You can tell it to the cops. I don't care."

Quint popped the passenger door open and swung his legs out. As frigid air flooded the car, Quint gave a shrill celebratory shout at the change in temperature. Kelli gawked as Quint drummed his feet against the ground, trying to rattle some life back into them after an extended period of sitting. "Hey!" she cried out, and called out again when he ignored her. "Hey!"

"I uh," Quint started without turning his head, "I don't really have anything to give you to repay

you for everything you've done for me." He stood up slowly to allow his cramped back time to prepare itself for action. He twisted around and hauled his cumbersome duffel bag out of the back seat. The bag bulged and resisted his pull when he tried to muscle it over the seats, and it flopped down into Kelli. She shouted again and threw herself against the steering wheel in an attempt to keep the gun pointed at Quint. He stopped to think for a moment and slung the bag over his shoulder. "Actually," he mused, "you should keep the gun. Listen, even if I thought you'd believe me I can't explain any more than I already have. The less you know right now, the safer you are. Hide that from the cops, and if anyone comes to you asking for me, use that and run as far away as you can."

Quint turned away and started walking northward, farther into the awakening town. Kelli clambered over the seats and chased him down. She jabbed the snubnose of the gun into his back. Quint writhed away and looked back with a mirthful grin, "Quit it! That tickles." That was the last straw. Kelli aimed squarely at Quint's kneecaps and with an enraged cry pulled the trigger back. The hammer smacked loudly against a spent primer with a cracking sound that snapped through the sharp air. Kelli tried to fire the weapon three more times, and ground her teeth more tightly each time the gun produced nothing more than mounting humiliation.

"A**h***!" she roared like a goddess defied. Quint gave her that maddening 'you prick me' look again before resuming his stroll.

"This from the girl who would have happily sold me out to appear on FOX. Relax, Kelli. This had to be much more stimulating than a calculus exam." Quint crammed the last of his sandwich into his mouth, waved, and disappeared around the corner.

Chapter Five: Kelli Green

Bellingham Police Department

Bellingham, Washington

October 23, 2004 – 10:05 AM

Kelli's jaw clacked like a machinegun as she looked up at the air vent with scorn. Why would they turn the air conditioning on, she thought, in Washington at this time of year? Maybe it was some kind of d***headed police interrogation technique similar to grilling suspects under a hot lamp and teasing them with water. "I'll tell you anything," they'd say, "For God's sake, give me that coffee!" She huddled miserably under the blanket that Sergeant Herkowicz had given her.

He'd produced it right out of the trunk of his squad car. She'd always seen that on television,

too. She hated to think she was ungrateful, but what was with the blankets? Is it some kind of universal comfort gift, like giving candy to a kid after a visit to the dentist? Do the police have a closet full of them, restocked and paid for with a special line item in the yearly budget? Turn up the f***ing thermostat! She could feel her butt freezing to the industrial steel chair. The blanket was cute and all, but it did nothing for the fact that Kelli felt dirty, salty, and buttered. All that toxic movie theater crud had been given time to absorb into her skin.

Jockeying the concession counter at a movie theater was a special kind of hell that even prison inmates would turn down. Inmates probably wouldn't be suitable for such a job, of course; people would be too afraid of them spitting in their sodas or strangling them. On the other hand, it was a struggle every night for Kelli to avoid throttling random customers. Her favorite fantasy was currently finding someone destined for a Brett Ratner movie, grabbing them by their bottom lip, and hurling them headwards through the glass countertop. She would be doing them a favor.

The detective across the table continued to scribble cursive onto his legal pad—the kind indecipherable to any but the author. He looked up every once in a while at her, squinted, then looked down and wrote again. She sighed and tried to turn the thermostat behind the detective with her mind in vain. Then she decided she didn't like this detective. He was too good at his job. He had the same smug method of questioning as the really sadistic liberal arts teachers: to ask a question, listen to the response, and then to remain quiet for exactly 5 seconds longer before speaking again.

It seemed silly, but it was perfect in its simplicity. After a response to a question, whether it be truth or falsehood, he just stared at Kelli with a slight frown. He looked hurt, or disappointed that was all she had to say. So, like an idiot, she would blabber on with meaningless details, explanations rife with circular reasoning, or off-the-cuff lies. All of these served only to dig her own grave and make her feel guilty, despite having done nothing wrong.

The detective adjusted his narrow glasses and tapped the point of his pen down on the paper. He dotted the hell out of that sentence and nodded in satisfaction, his expression reading “Boom. Period. So there.”

“Are you hungry at all, Ms. Green?” he asked. He leaned back in his chair.

Kelli blinked. She hadn't expected that one. She thought he was going to ask her more details about the drive, or the fight, or...or something. “Um...I don't know,” she murmured, drawing her blanket closer around her neck. She tried to think whether or not she was. She felt like she could eat, but fatigue and stress made her guts a tangled knot so tense she feared food might upset a fragile balance internally and leap straight back out of her.

He stared at her for five seconds. "So tell me what happened when you arrived in town. I just want to get your report on that on paper and document what happened."

"I stopped at the McDon—" she froze, suddenly realizing that she hadn't adequately prepared for this part. She swallowed and centered herself. It was fine, everything normal. I've done nothing wrong, it's that psychopath who's in trouble. They just want to know where he's gone and that'll be that. "At the McDonalds!" she smiled. Then she realized smiling was stupid and she stopped it. She frowned. A lot.

5. 4. Kelli's lip began to quiver. 3. 2. Her will collapsed. "He told me to. To drive there. To the McDonald's. He said to—um, to stop and get some food. Because he was hungry."

"And he made you go inside to get it."

"Yeah." Back on track.

The detective chewed on his pen. "Why not the drive-thru?"

F***!! "Uh...well I think he was going to let me go afterward. I think."

He nodded and seemed satisfied with that answer. He scribbled some more. "And you made the call inside the restaurant?"

"Yeah." 5. 4. 3. Damn him!! 2. 1. Yes!!

"That was really brave of you."

"Yeah!" Kelli pushed her bangs out of her eyes and let out a heady laugh. "Yeah I guess so. I was really scared. And—"

"But weren't you afraid that'd be the first thing he'd expect you to do? If I were him—" he put his hands up and slapped them gently on the table, "well I wouldn't trust you not to run or call for help. Ms. Green?"

"I was—God, it's cold in here. Could you—" she pointed to the thermostat with a trembling hand and wore the best sweet, innocent, hangdog "Please Mister Man, I need someone with testicles to protect wittle bitty me" look she could muster. She'd grown up in a house full of boys; she'd honed that look into a weapon that could blast apart small cities. The cop's chair flew back from the force of her innocent face, the four legs of the chair digging twin trenches into the cheap carpet. His legs churned until the chair was clear of the table, and he spun around to fiddle with the dial. It bought her enough time to come up with something

appropriately feminine and full of . “I told him I had to use the bathroom.”

“Oh.” He looked uncertain.

“I had some things I needed to take care of.”

Checkmate. The detective looked regretful he’d even bothered to ask. Since the dawn of American history, and probably a lot longer back than that, the ladies’ room has remained one of the few territories still held sacrosanct against invasion or even inquiry. They were inviolable no-chest-hair zones that provided safe haven from leers and unwelcome eavesdroppers. Through careful manipulations over the years, the mystique of the ladies’ room had formed a protective field where the rules of etiquette and manners were turned on their ears. For someone like Kelli on a social evening with others, she could announce her intention to use the facilities and often, her friends would volunteer to come along. Guys who made that offer usually never heard from their friend again (Or perhaps made an even better friend than before. Hey, it’s the 21st century.)

Men didn’t know what went on in there. Men didn’t want to know what went on in there. They probably imagined it to be some kind of elaborate spy network, with linked computers in the mirrors so women could talk to each other globally like in the Batcave. Although in some cases, it wasn’t far from the truth. They still knew that something plain weird was going on in there—something that filled them with fear. It’s hard enough for most boys to master hygiene for their own set of parts; even thinking about the differences in washroom behavior between the genders confused and frightened them. Only centuries of evolution had taught man to avoid sticking their fingers in their ears and shouting “La la la la!” at the top of their lungs at the mere mention of menstruation.

The majority of men, at least.

The word ‘bathroom’ conjured images of potpourri bowls and tampons in the detective’s mind. She could tell it was all he could do to not run screaming from the room. Kelli didn’t take an interest in the activities across the hall, she just had grown accustomed to the vagaries of both genders early on. In reality, most of the time she used public bathrooms she was shirking her duties to clean the restroom in favor of smoking a joint in one of the stalls. During one particularly bleak evening at work at the national release of Pearl Harbor, she did a jay while working the counter just to see if she could get fired. Someone complained, but they just put her to work pushing one of those piece-of- carpet sweepers that (in theory) collected the trampled shards of popcorn that littered the floors. It was a Sisyphean exercise; as soon as she’d cleaned one section of the floor, five hundred people had crossed another, spilled a bucket, dropped their Dr. Pepper, and vomited on the shoes of the person next to them. Then she had to go to the closet, push aside a giant furry penguin suit (nobody knew how it got their

or what its function was), and get the granulated pink scented sawdust substitute. When applied to pools of vomit, it replaced the horrible retching smell of puke with the horrible retching smell of base cleaning product.

“So. Eh,” the detective sat back down and fussed with his pen, “you made the call and then brought the food out?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t get anything for yourself?”

“Well no.” He kept staring at her. “He was very specific!”

“It’s just strange that he’d let you use the bathroom and not let you get something for yourself.”

“I don’t think I could have eaten around him anyway,” she scowled. She had to put the focus back on this Quint character. “He had a gun.”

“I understand. I’m not trying to upset you. There are just some things about your story that are confusing me.” He started reaching into his folder.

“Like what?”

He showed Kelli a digital photograph of her Pacer, its front end dented and crumpled at one end. The windshield on the passenger side was crushed inward, the shattered creases in the glass glistened red with blood. A dark hole was opened near the hood where Quint’s knee had punched through the windshield. “This is what your car looks like,” he said, as one would speak to an idiot. “After you struck the man with your car. Your statement says that you tried to brake, but you were going around forty miles per hour at the time of the collision. When we arrived at the scene, you’d told the officers that he had run away.”

“That’s right.” She thought it was best to stick to her guns here.

“He ran?”

“He ran.” Kelli put her hands up in the classic “I don’t know what to tell you” gesture.

The detective crossed his arms defensively and stared at her some more, seeming to hope she’d fall into the trap again. She didn’t. “Miss Green, if you hit a man going that fast he’d be lucky to ever walk again. And you’re telling me he killed a man, made you drive overnight into

Bellingham, and then ran away?”

“Hey you think you’re surprised? I thought I’d killed him at first. This guy is just...just inhuman.”

“Sounds like it,” the detective agreed. He scratched his goatee for a moment and leaned forward, propping his head on his fist. “Did he discuss anything with you? Where he said he was planning to go?”

“We were heading north. I think he just wanted to get as close to the border as possible in the car before heading into Canada on foot.”

“Sounds about right.” The detective bobbed his head in affirmation as he finished another sentence on his legal pad. “There’s a border patrol station just out of town; we’ve already alerted them to look for a man matching the description you gave. Got the airport covered, too. We’d prefer that you stay in town. We’ll definitely have more questions for you later once we’ve had time to investigate the crime scenes. I’m afraid that includes your dorm room, too, Miss Green.”

“I can’t stay in town,” Kelli protested, “I’ve got finals to do. I’ve already missed one.”

“Well that’s fine,” he shrugged, “as long as we can contact you when we need to. Is there anyone else on campus you know, or can your parents—”

“I have some friends on campus,” she snapped, sounding angrier than she meant to. “I don’t know how I’m going to get back there though, since you’ve got my car.”

“After we get you something to eat I’ll drive you back to Seattle. I want to take a look at the scene myself. Exchange notes with the local precinct. You know.”

The heavy door to the room opened inward, and another man in a tie stuck his head in. “Phone and about a dozen faxes for you, Luis,” he said, and pulled his head back out of the door.

“Okay,” the detective called behind him. He smiled at Kelli as he stood up and backed toward the door. “Relax here for a minute. You’ll be back home and safe in no time. We’ll get this guy. He’s injured and he’s desperate. He won’t get far.”

Andrea looked up from her computer as a tourist tromped up to the counter in cheap sneakers,

blue jeans, and a South Park t-shirt featuring an angry big-headed cop of some kind shouting “Respect Mah Authoritay!” He had a huge, frayed army-issue duffel bag slung over his shoulder. A thick wire led out of the bag and linked into a pair of headphones that he wore.

“Can I help you?”

“Wassat?” He smiled and whipped his shades from his head with a practiced flair, then tugged off his headphones. “Hey!” he grinned. “Sorry, I just got new batteries for these things. I was listening to Iron Man. I love Sabbath.”

“Can I help you,” she repeated. She remained patient. Tourists always found unique ways of being annoying. This was no different.

“Yeah! The ferry goes all the way to Juneau, right?” He tossed his glasses on the counter and dropped his bag heavily to the ground.

“Sure does,” she nodded, “we go all the way up the Alaska Marine Highway up to Skagway.”

“Really!” He looked astonished. “What the hell, I’ll go to the end of the line, hah! One round-trip ticket!”

She punched some keys on her computer. “Name?”

“Dex. Can I pay in cash?”

Chapter Six: The Reason for the Rain

Bellarmine Hall Dormitory, Seattle University

Seattle, Washington

October 23, 2004 – 6:10 PM

Kelli watched for the lightning, eyes scanning the eastern sky. She sat on the porch of her house back in McKeesport, Pennsylvania—the one they had before dad lost his job. The sound of rain was heavy in the air, drumming against the wooden overhang that kept her dry. Every now and then a rush of wind would spray her with a cool mist. It felt cleansing; she liked the feel of the wind against her face, her hair trailing free behind her.

A jagged light raked across the sky, and Kelli grinned. She began to count. At the count of eight,

a peal of thunder rolled over her head. It sounded like a rockslide, with a slow windup into a tremendous crash. She jumped, but threw her hands up in the air as she announced "Eight!" It was a game she used to play; she remembered that her dad told her she could judge the distance of the lightning by counting off the seconds before you heard the thunder after the flash. She remembered the counting part, but not how the seconds translated into distance. She always just used to shout out the number and dad would tell her.

There was no answer from her father. "Daaaad," she whined, "How far is it?" Still no answer. All Kelli heard was the growing hiss of the rain falling around her. She turned her head around to where her dad always stood, his arms crossed and eyes closed. The first thing she saw were mad, rage-filled eyes staring at the black clouds in defiance. The Frenchman scowled, and he turned his gaze down on Kelli. He smiled. Kelli shrank away from the man, hands outward to ward him away. She was panicked, unsure of what to say at this presence, whether to call for help or flee.

"Do you think there is a God, Kelli?" The Frenchman's face was gnarled and strange. He was smiling and yet his eyes held untold malice. She screamed and flattened herself against the rail of the patio, putting her back to the storm. "A father who made you? Made me?"

The wind picked up. Kelli felt the railing bow inwards against her back, felt the patio shift somewhat as the driven rain sheared onto the deck. The Frenchman pointed towards the lightning, "You have the choice to fight other men. But we fight for the storm." The wind screamed in Kelli's ears, and she threw her arms over her head. The patio groaned and then screeched in agony as the gale tore the wood apart. The roof was ripped from the patio, exposing everything to the elements. She was soaked almost instantly.

"No choice, no choice for us," the man hissed through his teeth. "Why is the storm there? Why do I fight for it? Why is the storm so dark?"

The clouds were torn apart overhead. Lightning forked together into a nexus and split downward in an instant, striking the Frenchman down. Kelli groped in a blind panic. Her eyes stung from the rain and could only see a chaotic green afterimage of the flash. She could make out the shape of a man collapsed on the floor on his hands and knees. She could hear his labored breathing and the rain sizzling on his back. She could smell ozone, and a foul mix of burnt wood, wool, and flesh.

"Kelli," the man groaned. He had a different voice now. Quint's? "The storm is coming for me. I need to know how close it is. I need to know."

Kelli crawled forward and touched the burning man. Her wonder had outweighed her horror somehow. She pulled her hand back as her hand stung against his skin. It felt like a live wire,

numbing her hand into a fist. “Please,” he begged, “the storm is coming. I need to know. I can’t see. I can’t hear. The voices inside me are screaming. I can’t see. They scream all the time...”

She flung herself around to confront the storm. But it was right on top of them. The lightning struck all around them. Each strike grew closer and closer, sending plumes of scorched glass and fire into the sky. It was everywhere, circling.

“How close?” Quint cried. He scrubbed at his eyes.

She knew the answer this time. The answer was zero.

“It’s here.”

Kelli’s head jerked upward violently at a loud thud that rattled her body. It came from just over her head. Her neck tensed and then spasmed at the sudden movement. She grimaced and dug her fingers into the clenched muscles. The harsh orange light of the setting sun flooded in through the windows. Kelli scrunched her eyes shut against the glare, and sat up in the car seat. An ugly clanking noise came from the window nearby as Detective Villareal smacked the back of his hand against it. His wedding ring popped into the glass.

“We’re here,” he said, his voice a mumble through the door.

Kelli had slept as a child after her first trip to an amusement park. She flopped into the backseat of Detective Villareal’s car and was out before the car left the parking lot. She’d been fed the Seattle cop’s breakfast of champions: bad coffee and some fossilized Entenmann’s cake from the vending machine. The detective meant well with the lunch, but even Kelli ate better in the dorms most days by scavenging loose Pop Tarts.

Villareal’s car was almost as big of a piece of s**t as Kelli’s was. The heater didn’t work, and the shocks were so bad it would make the old settlers on the Oregon Trail look at each other and say “we gotta get this damn wagon fixed.” Still, as tired as she was, Kelli could have slept an uninterrupted eight hours if warriors from Thunderdome attacked the car on motorcycles and semis converted into battlewagons.

She tossed her trusty police-issue blanket away and made a gurgling moaning sound from deep in her chest—a sound that in caveman translated to “I hate this planet.” Kelli was not a morning person. In fact, she wasn’t even an afternoon person. Some people seemed genetically predisposed to be perky and sunny at four in the morning, thinking their happy joy thoughts, and living only to 😊:):) the nocturnal people off by watching daytime TV. Of course, it wasn’t

early morning now, but now she feared that by waking up at night her whole schedule had been inverted. Worse, if it stayed that way she would become one of those morning people. Those sad bastards who watched Total Request Live and listened to the morning DJs crank out Nickelback on their drive to work every other song.

“Careful,” Villareal said. He opened the door for her. Still grinding her knuckles into her eyes, Kelli swung her legs out of the door and hopped out into the parking lot. Something crunched under her feet, a painful noise that made her grimace like someone was tearing Velcro next to her ear. She looked down and saw that the ground was covered in an awkward mosaic of glass. The shards were hard to look at, as the abrupt angles caught and reflected the glare of the setting sun. No matter which way she looked, there were at least a dozen pieces flashing light in her face that made her see spots. She made a confused sound as she saw that the entire dormitory was covered in the stuff: the sidewalks, the grass, even some of the cars. All the windows in the dorm were blown outward, as were the headlights and the windows of almost every car in the lot. The ones farthest away from the building seemed to have fared better, but not much.

“Jesus...” the detective said.

The parking lot was roped off with yellow police tape. Despite the fact that the scene was still over eight hours old, there were police photographers and several other investigative personnel about. Two ambulances blocked the entranceways into the parking lot, and a white hearse was parked diagonally across the three handicapped spots in front of the building. It was marked as the coroner’s vehicle, but she wondered why it was still there; surely they would have removed that man’s body by now. A couple of news vans were parked across the street, away from the police cordon. They had their antennae and telescoping dishes fully extended and stabilizing legs deployed from the undercarriage to support the displaced center of gravity.

Villareal led the way towards the dormitory hall. One patrolman at the door didn’t recognize him because he was from a different precinct, and tried to stop him. Villareal brandished his badge and held it before the man like a priest warding off a vampire with a crucifix. The patrolman wilted before the badge’s awesome power and shrunk into the shadows. The power of Christ compels you!

“Who’s in charge here?” the detective asked.

The patrolman pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Detective Forbeck. Second floor.”

Upstairs, the same story. Many of the dorm rooms here were accessed from an exterior walkway that encircled a grassy field where people could play sports and hold barbeques. Usually people just went there to throw up or burn themselves trying to hold barbeques. Right

now, Kelli's dorm was something of a campus legend because someone had taken some herbicide to the field and used it to spell out the words "WAYNE EATS C**K" in six-foot letters of dead grass. For the entire winter season and up until the spring when the grass grows back, everyone on campus would know that Wayne ate c**k.

On the other hand, maybe Wayne was making an offer. It's the 21st century. It's a nifty alternative to a personal ad. No, that didn't make sense. He would have made sure to leave his phone number. Kelli tried to see the positive side of things, but that's the sort of thing one needs a lot of practice at.

The rooms around this field all had exterior windows, and the walkway was usually lit with yellow hazard lights between the doors. All of these were shattered, bits of glass thrown out onto the concrete to crunch underfoot with every step.

"Careful, careful," Villareal repeated in a motherly tone.

The door to Kelli's dorm was still open. It was a microscopic room, even smaller than most normal housing. They were packed together like egg crates, with barely enough room to wedge a bed and a dresser inside. She was lucky to get a bathroom and a closet of her own. She'd heard that one apartment building had rooms little more than caskets; open the door and flop forward and you'd hit the bed. That building had a communal shower and toilet on the bottom floor where three hundred people went to mingle their body fluids and combine their illnesses into killer superstrains that could infect the entire building. Transients would use the place to shower, and you had to wear rubber flip-flops in the showers to keep from getting warts on your feet. Compared to that, Kelli's dorm was a Japanese mansion. The creative mind found ways to use vertical space to store other necessities. Stash clothes and videos under the bed. Stack your TV on top of the mini-fridge, and your books on top of that.

It's an arrangement that worked out as long as you weren't claustrophobic. The place was a disaster area of ad hoc piles of clothes and aluminum cans crafted into pagan shrines: the overflowing wastebasket and the great pyramid. Despite the outward madness of the scheme, Kelli knew everything's place and liked it. She didn't have to deal with a roommate's bulls**t. She did have to deal with people having parties and embarrassingly sloppy sex at all hours of the night. That was the worst part. She wasn't stuck-up, she just had standards. Quality, not quantity. It was hard to dig some drunken Cro-Magnon who was done faster than she could get through a cigarette. Lately the cigarettes were more satisfying.

Investigators swarmed around the dorm room, packed inside taking samples and snapping photos. They'd placed little Dixie cups on the floor and numbered them with permanent marker. It was a mob of at least a dozen people with their own individual tasks, all pressing against each other and begging their pardon as they moved about their business. It looked like

a badly-organized attempt to pile into a phone booth.

"I'm going to get some clean clothes," Kelli commanded. Villareal might have said something about not being able to do that yet, but who the hell cares? She started muscling her way through the group and got as far as the door before one brave patrolman put a hand to her chest and halted her progress with a condescending "whoa whoa whoa!"

"This is my place."

He wasn't listening. He had been brainwashed and had been planning his reply for hours. "Uh huh. I'm gonna need to have you wait over there, k?" None shall pass! Kelli tried to protest and speak rationally with the policeman, but he'd settled into the typical cop routine of not listening at all and repeating his ultimatums, usually with a mounting threat each iteration.

"Look I've got clean clothes under the—"

"Ma'am please just wait over there, k?"

"But—"

"Ma'am, just wait over there or I'm gonna have to escort you out."

She gave him a defiant "this isn't over" look and stepped back over to Villareal, who seemed to have found Detective Forbeck, an older cop with the kind of body that indicated over twenty years surviving on the cop diet of take-out and coffee. His hairline had retreated long ago, and he'd had the good sense not to bother with a comb-over. Forbeck probably got his suits off the rack at J.C. Penny's and had the same set of nine ties in his closet in a daily rotation, like a polyester batting order. Forbeck didn't look good, but it wasn't the fault of his clothes. His clothes were a predictable routine, as was most murder, Kelli suspected. This case was a weird one, and Forbeck's face wore a look of consternation. Weirdness made his job a whole lot worse, and he'd probably been here all day.

"I've got no shame," Kelli heard as she approached the detectives. Forbeck itched behind his ear and indicated the inside of Kelli's room. "I'll take all the help I can get with this one. The only question is, where do you want to start?" Forbeck saw Kelli approach and he stuck out his hand in greeting. "Miss Green? I'm Detective Forbeck. How do you feel?"

A complicated question. "I'm really not sure. Confused I guess." Forbeck grunted in agreement, and Kelli gave him a hip-hop handshake just to disorient him.

"Witnesses," Villareal said. "Who saw something?"

Forbeck gave a sardonic laugh, "Everybody saw something. Around a hundred and fifty people in the immediate area and they all saw and heard the same thing. You know how rare that is?"

"Well what was it?"

"They all said something to the effect of a storm waking them up. A power surge hit and blew out their computers and TVs, and the wind broke out their windows. But look around you. The glass is on the outside, and not just here. It's been blown outward from all sides."

Villareal looked back and forth between the hallway and the room. "It almost sounds like a bomb went off. You didn't find anything like that in the room, did you?"

Forbeck shook his head, "No. We were thinking the same thing. The first officers on the scene put in a call for the bomb squad. Searched the building room by room for some kind of concussive device, and the most explosive thing we found was a six-foot bong shaped like a didgeridoo."

"Doesn't make any sense," Villareal muttered, "Besides, don't you figure anything powerful enough to do that would have injured a lot of people?"

Forbeck scratched at the stubble on his neck. "Did you see him carry any kind of electronic device, Miss Green? Anything unusual that might account for this?"

Kelli shrugged. "I don't think so."

"What do you think it was?"

"I just don't know. It was freakish. There was wind and lightning. It—" she thought of Quint floating unsupported in the air and bit her lip. She must have been seeing things.

"It what?"

"I just don't think it was any kind of bomb," she sighed. "I mean, I was in the room when he killed that man."

Forbeck reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a notepad. He removed the cap from his pen with his mouth and mumbled, "Can you describe the man who was killed for me? As detailed as you can remember Miss Green."

Kelli opened her mouth to speak, but Detective Villareal raised his hand and stepped between

the two. "Hold it. What's this about?"

"I need a description of the victim."

Villareal hesitated, and then grew angry. "There's no body?"

"Well there's a hell of a lot of blood. Sending that down to tr—"

"There's no body," Villareal fumed, "Someone stole the-- How? When?"

"We've got a lot of statements from witnesses who might have seen that. Everyone ran outside when the explosion occurred. He's definitely not in this area. It looks like one, maybe two people ran off with something wrapped in Hefty bags and drove off in a white van. On the other hand, we've had about two dozen reports of stoners looting each other in the confusion."

"Great," Villareal groaned, "So now we have no idea who this guy was. What about prints?"

"Got lots of prints. Still checking 'em."

"What about the sword he had?" Kelli asked.

"Haven't found one of those, but the walls inside are slashed up and broken." Forbeck leaned with his back to the rail overlooking the field. "But that's a good angle to follow. It's unique as a weapon, might be traceable locally, and we can probably get samples of the metal off the wall. Excuse me." Forbeck straightened his tie, then forged into the group of investigators to shout out some more instructions to the people inside.

Villareal looked over at Kelli. "I'll give him a copy of your statement. You already told me everything he's likely to ask. You should go find your friend. You have a cell phone we can reach you at?"

"Yeah," she said, "But I left it inside there. You'll have to go get it for me."

Armed once again with her phone, she decided to go to her one place of refuge: Denny's—sanctuary for the insomniac student, land of eggs and free refills. And when the anime club wasn't f***ing around on meeting nights discussing how awesome Mobile Suit Gundam was, and how the new StarOcean game owned their souls, Denny's provided some blissful solitude. Kelli liked anime, but anime clubs just seemed like a depressing Otaku Anonymous where people came to admit they had a problem too. She just didn't see how watching anime with more people made it any better.

Villareal had even managed to scavenge her some clothes from under the bed, including her prized red leather jacket. For some reason he even included three complete sets of underwear and handled the whole stack as if it were a complex nuclear device that might go off if jostled. None of the clothes really matched and she looked like even more of a fashion victim than normal, but at least the clothes were clean and she was warm.

Kelli felt safer the moment she crossed the threshold into the restaurant. After six P.M. the pies were fresh and filled the air with a sweet aroma of cherries and apples. She passed a dating couple that were cramming dollars into the requisite Denny's claw-game machine, and stopped to watch them fail. There was no winning the Denny's claw game. Even the few toys that were remotely attainable (not the Shrek DVD) had entered into the long process of geological shifting. The various strata of plush animals had, over the decades, compressed together and formed a solid crust that was impenetrable unless a complicated and precise array of shape charges were applied. In other words, they had a snowball's chance in Phoenix of nabbing that Powerpuff Girl that Betty Bubblehead coveted so badly.

She picked a booth and crashed in it. Most other Denny's you couldn't do that; the senior citizens in line would break your knees with their walkers. No such worries of that on campus. She ordered a proper meal this time, with proper nutrients and somewhat natural origins. Eggs, ham, toast, greens. It was heavy stuff, but Kelli hadn't eaten anything worthy of being called food in about two days. She was owed.

She was shoveling eggs into her mouth without shame when she felt a presence approach from behind her. "Umm good," she mumbled with a full mouth, and held up her empty glass of Coke to be taken away.

"Good evenin' to yeh, Miss Green," spoke an older voice at her shoulder, thick with an accent she hadn't heard since she visited her grandparents. "D'yeh moind if I join yeh?" But the man was asking permission ex post facto. By the time he'd finished the question, he'd already landed in the seat across from her.

Kelli swallowed. "What are you, some kind of reporter?" He probably wasn't, but she was hoping.

"In a manner a speakin'." He looked almost as tired as she was. Looked like everyone was pulling long hours lately. He looked enviously at her food and flagged down the waiter from across the room. "Oi've ne'er been in a Denny's. Can yeh get a pint in this place?"

"Of what, beer?"

"Of anything."

"I don't think so."

"Ah Jaysus, really? It's like yeh're all ashamed of havin' a bevvie now and again. That stuff looks good though." The old man pointed at her plate and played a brief game of charades with the waiter to get him more of the same.

"So..." Kelli motioned for the Irishman to get on with it.

"Oh right! My name's Jack, and you're lucky I found yeh first. Because if me gut instincts are right there are others lookin' for yeh, and they won't ask yeh nearly as nicely as I will."

Kelli's face fell. All her fatigue immediately came crashing down on her, and she planted her face in her hand. "Ask me what?"

"Where in the high holy hell did Quint run off tae?"

Chapter Seven:Dex, Lies, and Videotape

Denny's Parking Lot

Seattle, Washington

October 23, 2004 – 6:45 PM

"Il ne peut y en avoir qu'un,"

"At the risk of sounding unsportsmanlike, you started it."

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!!

Kelli flicked the pause button on the video camera and tossed her head around to look at Donahl, her movements swift and clumsy with curiosity. "That last part, what did he say?"

Donahl stood against the side of his rental car with his arms crossed. At Kelli's question, he picked the cigarette from his mouth and spoke after exhaling a column of smoke. "There can be only one."

"What does that mean?" Donahl stuck the cigarette back between his lips. Kelli pointed a finger at the LCD monitor of the camera. Two bright red and orange human-shaped blobs blazed brightly against a field of deep blue. She motioned to the taller one—the Frenchman. "I want to know who he is."

“He’s dead.”

“God damn it!” Kelli snapped.

“His name was Vincent Rousseau. He was born around ten or twenty years before the French Revolution. And from what little else Oi know of him, he’d almost never left Europe. Oi thought he was one of the good ones, but Oi’ve been a bahd judge o’ people lately.”

“The Fr—what do you mean, he was one of the good ones?”

Donahl sighed and turned to look at Kelli. His face was somber and tired. “Farst things farst, miss. Oi realize the video an’ sound quality is fer sh**e considerin’ Oi ‘ad to film it in thermo. But d’yeh believe what I was tellin’ yeh befere? About Quint, eh?”

Kelli pulled the hair tie off her ponytail and put the camera down. She smoothed her hair back, then spoke after a moment to think. “This Rousseau guy...he jumped Quint in a church for like, no good reason. And what about that third man? I could only barely hear his voice before they fought.”

“Oi dunno. Wish Oi did, Oi can tell yeh that. But I was a mite preoccupied an’ Oi ne’er saw ‘im leave at the time. A right barmy bastard he is, though.”

“Just...tell me what this is all about,” Kelli burst.

Donahl had never had to explain all of this before, but he decided to try and relate to her slowly, mounting one unbelievable claim at a time. “Quint an’ Rousseau are nae like us. The man yeh know as Quint has walked the planet for roundabout two thousand years. Rousseau for hundreds. Some far longer than either. At sometime in their natural lives, somethin’ ‘appened where they shoulda died, but they didn’t. They kept livin’, and they’ll keep livin’. Yeh’ve seen it. Shot, stabbed, run over, it donnae matter. They’ll live. There be only one end taen Immortal, and that’s the removal of their ‘ead from their body. An’ many of them believe that they must fight until only one remains. They believe that in the end, there can be only one.”

Kelli picked at her lip and finally threw her hands up in resignation. “Fine. Why?”

“Why?”

“Why do they think that they have to fight?”

"When one Immortal kills another, something 'appens. Yeh saw it, didn't yeh? Wind...lightning...that sort of thing? Eh? It's said that the winner takes the memories and the strength of his opponent into himself. They claim the power of the loser, d'yeh see? And they say that when only one remains, well...that Immortal lays claim to the Prize. I don't think anyone really knows what it is, but everyone knows that they want it, and they'd do almost anything to keep anyone else from having it."

"How do they know it even exists?"

"What?"

"This Prize," Kelli shrugged, "How can any of them really know there's any kind of prize at the end of the rainbow? Is there some kind of handbook that explains this sh**? Sounds to me that it's some kind of religious crap one of 'em invented a long time ago and everyone bought into it because it brought some kind of sense to it all."

Donahl blinked. He looked for a moment like a fuse blew in his mind. "At's a damn good question, that."

"So that explains why he wanted to kill Quint."

Donahl shook his head furiously. "Like 'ell it does. He jumped Quint in a church. They've got rules, and one of the most important is no fightin' on holy ground. I dunno who came up with the rules either, but...well, yeh might think it's a matter o' politeness. Something so they'd have some chance a sleepin' at night somewhere safe. An' it might be, but it's more'n that for a lot of 'em."

"What, like they're afraid God will get pissed off?"

Donahl knelt down to look evenly with Kelli at eye level. "I dunno. Maybe. There's a story that's kicked around the Watchers. They say that there's only one documented occurrence o' two Immortals fighting on holy ground. And that was in the city of Pompeii. Near Mount Vesuvius."

Kelli had to think for a moment to make the connection from her history classes, but not long. Her face twitched in uncertainty as she pondered the weight of what she just heard.

"Now if yeh ask me, it's probably all a loada sh**e," Donahl said, but raised a finger in warning. "Probably. Now yeh might call it tradition, honor, or just plain bein' polite. It's the one thing even the real scum of the earth usually agree on. Partly because it's a place o' truce. And partly because...well, yeh never know. Best not to tempt the fates."

“Okay,” Kelli said, slapping her knees with her hands to declare that subject dead. “So why would Rousseau do it now?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I been kickin’ around in me head.”

“Did Quint do something to 😊:):):) him off.”

“He’s done a lot of things to 😊:):):) a lot o’ people off. But I’ve been watchin’ Quint for nearly eight years. Everywhere he’s gone, everything he’s done. Did he do anything specific to Rousseau? I don’ think so.”

“Do they all have Watchers like you? Did Rousseau have one? Maybe you could ask—”

“No,” Donahl snapped gruffly, “Not anymore. His Watcher tried to kill me, too. Besides, I don’t think he would have known anything, and I don’t think this even has anything to do with Rousseau. No... I think whatever the reason, it has to do with the third man. That nutter who held his leash and kept spouting Keats.”

Kelli cringed and scooted back from Donahl, farther into his car. “Oh no, don’t tell me you’ve killed someone too.”

Donahl reached into his coat pocket and tossed a small boxy device onto the seat in front of her. It looked like a cheap black device made from Radio Shack parts, nothing more than a hunk of plastic the size of a pack of cigarettes with two switches on the top. “He tried to poison me, the little sh**e. An’ to destroy the evidence—of the Watchers an’ everythin’, he left a lovely little bomb. A bomb he was gonna set off with that soon as he was clear.”

Kelli swallowed and backed away even more from the remote, retreating into the driver’s seat. “Okay that’s great. Can you take that thing away now? Where did he get a bomb like that anyway?”

“He didn’t,” Donahl rumbled. His eyebrows drew down into a sharp point, “He left a thermos full o’ Semtex on that rooftop. Homebrew stuff. Vaughn was good, but...”

“Semtex?”

“It’s a plastic explosive. It’s an auld favorite for blowin’ up restaurants and crowded areas. Fill somethin’ up with Semtex and nails and...well...you’ve got yourself a terrorist anti-personnel device on the cheap. I haven’t seen anythin’ like that in years.”

“What??”

“I wasnae t’always a Watcher, lass. Les just leave it at that, yea?”

Kelli frowned.

Donahl plucked up the makeshift detonator and put it back in his pocket. “There’s somethin’ bad happenin’, Miss Green. Somethin’ fockin’ evil. This is bigger than two maniacs tryin’ ta hack each other apart with swords. Whoever’s behind alla this has convinced at least one Immortal into breaking a rule that nobody’s even thoughta breakin’. An’ it’s gotten into the Watchers, and I dunno how deep. Maybe it was just Vaughn. Maybe no. But Oi do know that they want Quint, and they don’ seem to care a mule’s nadsack about the rules. It’s only a mattera time before they get to yeh.”

“What about the police?” Kelli asked with weak optimism.

“Well it’s an option,” Donahl shrugged, “They seem alright. Oi came to yeh because I need your help. Yeh don’t have to, but I promise soon as Oi leave ye’ll never see me again. Oi won’t be able to help yeh.”

“Finding Quint? You’re the Watcher, don’t you have some kind of homing beacon on him or something?”

“Oi did.” Donahl pointed into the backseat. Kelli twisted around to look, and saw Quint’s old coat, filthy and slashed up from the previous night’s battle. “Found it in a dumpster about two blocks from where he ran off. He ditched his clothes and by now he could be anywhere.”

“Jeez,” Kelli groaned.

“Yea, exactly. Did he say anything specific about where he was headed?”

“No, he didn’t tell me anything. Said it was for my safety, and I wouldn’t believe him anyway.”

Donahl muttered something in Gaelic that sounded unflattering to a number of saints. “Then there’s only one way to find him. And I’ll still need your help.”

“Ouija board?”

Donahl gave her a smile and rolled up one of his sleeves. He showed her a dark circular tattoo on the inside of his wrist, the inside of which was filled with a bold design, perhaps a bird of some kind. “How would you like a temporary membership into the Watchers? Free tat and

night-vision goggles this week only.”

“You throw in a secret decoder ring, Jack, and I’ll think about it. You sure this is all worth it? You could just hide.”

Donahl moved to the driver’s-side door of his car and motioned for Kelli to move over. “It’s worth it. Quint is one of the good ones, even if nobody else think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“You ever hear the old saying, ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions’?”

CHAPTER EIGHT: TYRANT’S DOOR

Gulf of Pelusium, near Egypt

September 27, 48 BC

A chill rose from low in Dexion’s spine. The sun had only begun to climb over the horizon, and it would be hours before the weather grew from far too cold to much too hot. The skies were a swirling wash of deep violet and gray, a sight too beautiful to suit him. He felt ill, only partially because of the rolling deck of the fishing boat. He grimaced and folded his arms into his cloak.

Septimius walked the length of the boat, periodically stopping to speak to the others aboard. He circled the mast and walked towards the fore, towards Dexion. He turned away so that he might avoid speaking. The sail was reefed tightly and tied; the boat stood a mile from the coast, waiting. Septimius passed Dexion and gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder.

“Courage, Dexion my friend,” the veteran said quietly in his ear, “You will see Rome again. I swear it.”

Dexion thrashed his arm away from Septimius’ touch and cast a vile look over his shoulder. Septimius left him and wandered to the rail to speak to Salvius and an Egyptian who dressed as a noble. The Egyptian was called Achilles, a man Dexion had seen at the council meeting. He was a gifted orator, and often employed by the regent Potheinus for much of King Ptolemy’s diplomatic relations. It was Achilles who greeted Dexion’s century when their ship arrived in Pelusium, and allowed them to stay camped outside of the city. It was Achilles whom Potheinus had chosen to go with them to greet Pompey. The plan required an Egyptian face aboard.

Achilles pounded his fist against the port-side rail—a rare show of emotion for the diplomat. He

was afraid, visibly aware that he was in more immediate mortal danger than he had ever been before. The Egyptian flashed his hand out to the ocean beyond. He indicated a lone ship to the north, a large Roman vessel that also sat motionless in the black waters about a mile away. Dexion could see no movement on the galley's deck, but he could see the dark shapes of men standing idle near the masts, the sails reefed up tightly. The Roman ship came alone, bearing Pompey at the invitation of the Egyptian king. The rest of Pompey's fleet remained passive farther north, arrayed defensively in the deeper waters. They awaited pursuit from Caesar.

"Why does he delay?" Achillas asked Dexion, pointing again to Pompey's ship. "Why does he not come to us?"

Dexion motioned for Achillas to speak more quietly with a subtle push of his hand downward. "This fisherman's boat is not what he was expecting," he replied. His voice sounded hoarse even to himself. "It is too mean a vessel to entertain one such as he. Neither princely nor honorable, no doubt they question the manner of their reception."

"Then why did we not bring one of your Roman ships?" Achillas demanded. His eyes were wide, seeming fearful that Pompey's ship would attack and overwhelm them.

"Because I dare not ask any of my men to be a part of this," Dexion muttered. "I would be ashamed to face them."

"Then why are you here, Dexion?"

"To save my men. To see my wife again. So my men can see their wives again. But the cost is bitter. I fear I pay with my very soul this day."

Salvius leaned against the rail on Dexion's other side. With his dark and deep eyes and his thick raven-colored beard, Dexion could barely see his friend's face in the dawn's light. Salvius was a taller man, but leaned forward so his elbows rested on the rail, and this brought them all to an equal height. "You should not speak so, Dexion. You have heard the tales of Caesar's savagery. You save hundreds today. Think of it as the least of evil choices."

"But it is still evil," Dexion snapped.

Salvius sighed and after a moment, nodded his head towards Pompey's ship. "Look there, Dexion. They are coming."

Dexion saw that the deck of the Roman ship had grown busy with men tending to ropes. The large square sails of the ship were unfurled and angled to catch the wind. In a short while, the galley grew closer, and they again rigged their sails up. A shout rose from the deck, and long

sweeping oars spread from both sides. These oars pushed the vessel delicately and swiftly so it drew parallel to the fishing boat. When it was close enough, there was another shout and the oars pulled back within the ship. The Roman ship dwarfed the long fishing boat. Many of the men on the galley's deck peered down at them, their heads almost even with the top of their boat's sail.

Roman soldiers stood on the deck, at least forty in number with more below decks. In the poor light, they seemed deadly shadows ready to leap forward. Only lanterns suspended from hooks on the ships provided any light, and then just enough to work with. Dexion could not identify faces, merely guess at their station by their shape. Septimius and Achilles stood forth centrally.

"Welcome, Imperator!" barked Septimius in the Latin language. He addressed Pompey thus, and by his title of office perhaps to assure all aboard his ship that they were indeed also Romans. He yelled his greeting loudly and with practiced clarity. Perhaps too loudly, but as he called up to the other ship, it was best to be safe so there could be no misunderstandings.

"Welcome, Great and Noble Pompey," exclaimed Achilles in the Greek tongue. "I am Achilles, emissary of King Ptolemy XIII. My king sends his greetings and wishes to speak with you, for he is most honored at your visit. He offers you and your men safety in his kingdom. If it pleases you, come aboard so we might personally escort you to the palace."

Moments passed, and three men approached the side of the galley. They were not dressed as the soldiers were, in their deep red cloaks. They were plainly dressed, their cloaks gray or brown. The man in the center was Pompey, it was clear. He seemed the youngest of the three, but still Quint's senior by far. While he wore no gold or jewels, he had a noble carriage and seemed somehow greater than everyone on the ship. His face was not hard, but strong. His eyes were steely, narrow and tight from squinting against the sun for years. The other two men were older still, their hair long and white. They wore white clothes that had aged to a pale gray from exposure to wind, rain, and dust.

Behind them stood a slender woman, clad in fine linens. She was of an age close to Pompey's, and wore a necklace of gold, a small pendant of stones shimmering at her bosom. Dexion guessed she was Pompey's wife, named Cornelia. She seemed to be weeping, as she kept raising her hands to her face and making faint sniffing sounds. She kept a hand on their son; he was a strong-looking youth, but anxiously shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked cornered. Near her stood a bare-chested slave and a freedman who seemed to be personal companions of Pompey.

"Greetings, Achilles," shouted down the oldest man to the left. "Where are the centurions our messenger spoke of? He told us of three. We are eager to see how they have been treated."

Achillas looked insulted, but motioned to Dexion, and Salvius and Septimius behind him. "We have been made most welcome," called Salvius.

"Where is Artorius Dexion?" Pompey demanded, stepping forward to look at the three. The other centurions made the answer clear by casting startled looks squarely upon him. Dexion felt their stares upon him, but did not react. He angled his head up to look on his honored leader.

"I am Dexion, Imperator."

Pompey nodded deeply, his eyes searching the shadows as if he could read Dexion's sins. It filled Dexion with fear at what he might see. "Do you remember the day I was elected consul, and your father brought you and your brothers to the celebration?"

"I do, Imperator, but I was no more than eight years old."

"Do you remember what we talked about?"

"You asked what I wanted to be when I grew to be a man, and I said I wanted to fight with a hero such as you. You laughed and said that I could never march in a legion if I held a sword in my left hand."

Pompey laughed, and even the soldiers on his ship flinched in surprise. "I have always remembered your name, young Artorius, because you rather rudely told me not to laugh. I see you have learned."

"I have," Dexion agreed. "I await your command."

The other man to Pompey's right shouted in a nasal voice down to them, "We will follow you into the harbor."

Achillas raised his hand in warning, "Your pardon; but the harbor is shallow near the shore. I fear that a galley of such burden as yours would strike upon the sands.

At that, Pompey's wife and son stepped forward and shouted in protest. "You cannot go with them!" Cornelia cried. "Please!"

"Father, can you not see—" Pompey's son shouted, angrily thrusting his hand to point at the shore of Pelusium before a sharp hushed word silenced him. Pompey turned to face his family and they spoke quietly so that none on the fishing boat could hear.

Pompey gestured urgently for calm and turned away, and Cornelia again cried out "No!"

Several men brought up a long plank and placed it between the vessels, angled steeply downward. At his command, two centurions, then Pompey's slave and attendant freedman descended the plank. Achilles and Salvius reached out their arms to aid each man onto the boat. Dexion remained where he was, preferring to stay out of the way and watch Pompey bid farewell to his family. Cornelia wept openly, and entreated her husband to reconsider. His son also battled tears, but said nothing more. From here, Dexion could see Pompey's face and somewhat read his lips. So it was that he could barely hear and understand Pompey's parting words to his wife and son.

"He that once enters at a tyrant's door, Becomes a slave, though he were free before."

Pompey boarded the ship in silence, and long in silence they sailed. He stood near his centurion guard as the boat neared the shores of Pelusium. He looked intently to Salvius and Dexion, as if inviting them to speak, but none had words of greeting or friendly things to say. Dexion could not meet Pompey's look, and Septimius busied himself overseeing the voyage. When Septimius neared Pompey, the great leader's face was troubled at the foul and somber mood among the crew. Septimius even seemed to scowl a bit at Pompey's look.

"I am not mistaken, surely, in believing you to have been formerly my fellow-soldier," said Pompey, his tone hurt at Septimius' coldness. "I remember you as well, Septimius. We fought together for many years, and you served me with honor."

But Septimius only nodded, and offered nothing more when he passed by. Pompey began to read a book that he carried, and muttered the words written within as if he were rehearsing for a speech. The words written in the book were also in Greek, a language that the king would understand. He sat, and when he had finished reading a page, he allowed a slight smile to cross his countenance, and looked up at Dexion.

"I know that you have been made to come here and welcome me, Dexion," Pompey said with comfort in his voice. "I did not expect to arrive at the court of Ptolemy as anything other than a servant forever indebted to his hospitality. He knows my flight from Rome is desperate and my need for aid dire, and it will be costly indeed. But it is a start, Dexion. Come, sit with me and tell me of your family." Pompey tapped the palm of his hand on the deck nearby.

Dexion wavered, but remained standing. He lowered his head and breathed, "I am sorry I deceived you. It is inexcusable."

"Deceived me? Nonsense. You do as you must. You have ever done what is best. You have a good soul, Dexion. I know this."

The boat reached the shore, and all aboard could see a large honor guard of Egyptian soldiers amassed in formation to await Pompey's arrival. They carried tall spears and long banners that trailed in the wind.

"Help an old man to his feet, Dexion? Philip?" Pompey chuckled and extended his hands out to Dexion and the freedman. They grasped the great leader's arms and eased his way to his feet.

With a flash of motion, an arm lashed around Pompey's neck from behind, and pulled him savagely backwards into a waiting sword thrust. Septimius snarled in exertion as he plunged his sword up through Pompey's back and out through his chest. A crimson spike protruded from under Pompey's robe, and fell as Septimius wrenched his sword free in a bloody deluge.

Pompey's bodyguards reached for their own blades and shouted warnings, but too late. Salvius and Achilles had already reached their flanks. Salvius dispatched one of the centurions with a quick thrust up into the underside of the man's armpit and through his heart. Achilles hacked down into another centurion's skull with much less practice, pounding the man with the edged blade into his face was a jagged and leaking mess of bloody strips and oozing crushed bone. Philip and Pompey's slave screamed and fell to their knees in shock, unable to comprehend what they saw.

Pompey's legs trembled, and he wobbled on uncertain feet, regarding the spreading stain on his robe. His teeth were bared, clenched in a rictus of agony. He fell against Dexion, who dropped to a knee and tried to hold him upright. Pompey groaned weakly through his punctured lungs and gathered up handfuls of his robe, pressing them to his eyes to mask his face and muffle his pained moans.

Dexion watched the murders around him and froze. He stared at his fallen hero, but could only see blood. Ptolemy's honor guard stormed onto the boat and slaughtered the servants immediately with their spears. Septimius pushed Dexion with his boot.

"Dexion. He is soon dead, Dexion. Finish it quickly, or I shall."

Dexion lurched forward and pushed Septimius away; a tortured cry arose from the depths of his chest. He unsheathed his sword, wiping his tears away with his sleeve. His sleeve was slick, wet with Pompey's blood, and he only managed to smear his master's blood across his face. Dexion considered asking for forgiveness, but failed to find the will to do so. He raised his blade high over his head and brought his full weight down on the back of Pompey's neck, channeled through the sword's edge. His blows were errant and imprecise; it took three full blows delivered thus before great Pompey's head fell from his body.

Septimius spat over the side of the boat. "You never mentioned that you met him as a boy."

Dexion fell back against the side of the boat and cast his sword away as if it were a viper. Vitality had drained from his face. "What have I done?"

Salvius seemed not to notice Dexion's despair, and he clapped him about the shoulder. "What have you done? You've ended a war, Dexion. You've saved the lives of thousands of Romans."

"There is but one thing left to do," Septimius intoned. "Await Caesar."

Chapter NINE: Talons of the Three Dragons

Foredeck of the M/V Lituya
30 miles east of Sitka, Alaska
October 25, 2004 – 2:01 AM

Quint was torn away from his murky dreams as though they were a fabric rent in half. His nights were rarely his own; it was often the Others who dictated his visions when the safeguards of his waking consciousness were lowered in sleep. This dream was his, but it was a powerful memory that must have battled mightily to overpower the Others'. They raged inside his soul, howling furies restrained only by the gates of his will. They cursed him and damned him for their imprisonment, and yet their knowledge came unbidden to him. Their memories swam up from his inner abyss, and he would find himself musing on recollections that were not his own. The voices in his mind were at all times truthful and willing to help, but always wishing aloud that he would perish in payment for their eternal slavery.

They were all bitter, all filled with torment and rage. Except one. And for some reason, her quiet voice of comfort cut through the hellish din like sunlight through darkness. And a word from that voice hurt more deeply than a thousand years of their condemnations.

"You are not an evil man."

"Shut up."

"You've always tried to do the right thing. Even Pompey told you this."

Quint's fists ached from clenching them so tightly in his sleep, his bones felt frozen in the Alaskan night, with air so bitterly cold that every breeze made his skin crawl back and prickle like stretched leather. He was alone on the foredeck of the ferry; few were hardy (or foolish) enough to stand the oncoming northern winter nights outside and so elected for passenger berths below decks. Quint had borne much worse. The deck was painted white, washed with

silvery water that glowed with the light of the moon above. Islands to both sides of the ferry rolled past with majestic grace, almost like dark and luminous clouds. A bell tolled forlornly behind him, probably to mark the passing hour.

He'd broken his own rule; he'd spoken back to the voices. It made no sense, but he felt that he wasn't insane for hearing the Others speak. The day he started responding to them was the day he was truly mad. So much for that. The voices never lied. It was true; he'd always tried to do the right thing, and yet he never did. Maybe it didn't make him evil, but it still made him pathetic.

Quint sat up and opened his sleeping bag. His arms freed, he reached up to feel the briar patch of a beard that was growing on his face. He hadn't shaven in a week or more, nor bathed properly in twice that time. No doubt he seemed like a transient, offending the eyes and nose alike. But life had grown complicated lately. He sighed and realized that he'd never get back to sleep tonight. Even if he did, he wasn't willing to confront the dreams the Others might summon up for him. He felt polluted walking through the memories and lives of other people.

He stood up and decided that now was as good a time as any to shave and shower, even if the water was bound to be just above freezing. They'd left the last port hours ago, and it would be daybreak before they reached Angoon, probably a safe place to leave and shake the police at last. Quint walked along the portside railing and drew his coat tightly against his body as a gust of wind picked up and made him grimace. The wind stung his eyes and caused the corner of a nearby tarp that covered a life boat to flap wildly. Quint's gaze was drawn by the noise and motion. He saw the fabric whip about and settle as the breeze died, the metal ring in the corner popped down on the metal railing of the life boat. Near it, he saw the broken rope that formerly held the tarp down.

No, he realized, not broken. Cut.

Steel lanced out from the covered lifeboat. The point of the straight-edged sword thrust for a point directly between his eyes, and instinct alone sent Quint leaping backward against the wall to avoid the attack. He reached into his coat for his own swords and heard cats paw feet hit the deck gently to his left and his right as they swung on board the ferry from outside. They were soaking wet and covered entirely in black wetsuits and appeared in the moonlight to be oily wraiths. They wore dull gray metal forearm bracers that ended in long hooked claws, probably used to scale the side of the ship. A third man emerged from under the lifeboat directly in front of him, bearing a slender straight blade. They all wore headbands embroidered with an intricate red design, but Quint didn't dwell on it long.

Quint spun his twin gladii and swept his glance between the three men. He was glad he'd taken to wearing his weapons again. He realized that it was foolish to think that he could ever hope to

walk anywhere— anywhere—defenseless, no matter how much he might long to walk the earth as a normal person. Confusion reigned in his mind. He didn't feel them approach. They weren't Immortals. How did they--?

The swordsman barked out a sharp kiai and swung his blade downward for Quint's throat. Quint juke to the right and charged left, back to where he came from. Both men to his sides leapt backwards and flung their hands out to him. From their hands sprang whirling bladed stars that caught the moonlight so briefly and so brightly that it left spots in Quint's vision. He did his best to twist to the side to present a smaller target, but he was peppered on both sides with the shurikens. He couldn't count how many, but his legs and arms lit up with shooting pain that threatened to paralyze him in this cold.

Quint dashed forward and attacked with a double-stab. The shuriken wheels were buried to their halfway points in his arms, the edges tearing into his muscles with each slight motion. His opponent tried to catch his swords between his tiger claws and twist them away with the hooks. But Quint's thrusts were a feint. The ninja hooked the swords, but Quint kept running forward through his defense in mid-maneuver. He smashed his forehead into the masked face, crushing the bridge of the man's nose flat. All technique was forgotten when Quint did this. The ninja brought his hands to his face, and Quint gave him a front-kick to the sternum that propelled him backwards into a twitching heap.

He had to move fast. Quint dove behind the corner as another volley of shurikens came. Only one more hit, but it sank squarely into his Achilles tendon. Quint fell to his face as his leg seized up and refused to cooperate any longer. He dragged himself upright and plucked the star-shaped weapons from his body with frantic speed, caring little for the pain and blood. He needed to be mobile. He needed to be calm and focused. He was sick of being ambushed by cowards. He latched onto his anger and with its strength hauled himself upright, his legs numbed and spasming with the threat of collapse under his weight.

The other two sprinted around the corner and moved to flank him on either side. The swordsman changed the grip on his weapon and gave a shout, and both moved in with measured steps. He snapped his head back and forth between them to see who would make the first move. If they were trained martial artists, he had to take them off their routine, to put them in a situation their training didn't account for. Cute thought, but he had no idea how to do that. He attacked the swordsman immediately to keep the most lethal threat in focus and to try and put them on the defensive. It didn't work, as they immediately closed in and went for blood.

Quint's blades whirled as fast as reflex. He pressed the attack against the swordsman, the battle ranging across the deck as his enemy backpedaled. The man behind him fought warily, kept at bay by the Immortal's broad slashes. The fight drew close to a steep staircase, and the

swordsman retreated momentarily to climb up and gain the high ground. Quint turned his full attention on the attacker with the tiger claws now that his partner had abandoned the fight. He thrust forward with his gladius and the ninja sidestepped, parrying it aside with his heavy bracers. Quint flowed smoothly with the deflection and strode with it, but drew his elbow sharply upward as he crossed past. The point of his elbow struck the man in the side of the throat. The ninja made a choked, gurgling sound and arched his back upwards from the force of the blow. Quint grappled the stunned man, locked his throat under his armpit, squeezed, and dropped to a knee. He could feel the man's neck splinter with a wet crunching sound muffled against his body. The ninja's fingers scrabbled helplessly at his arm, and Quint let him fall against the deck.

Shouts came from below decks and the bridge. Lights flared from opened doorways, framing the silhouettes of curious tourists and crew members. The sudden change ruined Quint's night vision, and he raised a hand too late to block out the light. He could barely see the last remaining ninja standing above him at the top of the stairs. The man ran forward and leapt from the top stair. He somersaulted with ease, as if he were a gymnast who weighed no more than a hundred pounds. Quint regained his feet and readied himself to fight in front of all the waking crew and passengers.

The ninja hit the ground running. Or at least, he tried to. One of the padded slippers he used to walk silently with landed in a standing puddle of water on deck and slid without any friction to secure his landing. His knee was wrenched to the side and he fell in an awkward tumble. Quint was sure he heard something snap low in the man's leg. The ninja-to sword bounced across the deck and settled at Quint's feet. The ninja tried to stand, but snarled in pain and fell backwards.

"Kill me, Immortal," he said, his voice muffled through the mask. "I am beaten."

Quint had a thousand questions for him, but right now the crew was calling the police, the coast guard, and anyone who might listen that there were murderers and maniacs on board. Soon they would overwhelm him. "No honor in it now."

"Failure is death," the ninja retorted.

"Who sent you? How did you find me?" But the ninja said nothing, simply stared at him. Quint knelt down by him and pulled his mask off. The man was of Asian descent, most likely Japanese given his current hobby, but Quint didn't care about his face as much as the symbol on his headband. It was a crimson symbol of three dragons swarming around each other in a figure eight, talons wrapped around each other's throats. It was a perversion of the ouroboros, a symbol for infinity. He knew who it was all along. He thought he recognized the symbol at first glance. He was just truly hoping that he was wrong, that it would turn out to be someone else. Anyone else.

“Kill me!”

Quint shook the mask in the man’s face and took him by the throat. “Shut up. If the Three Dragons wanted a fight with me, all they had to do was ask me to come. They would never send mortals to take my head. Why didn’t they come themselves? The quickening would be wasted on you.”

“They want you dead.”

“But—”

“They want you,” the ninja repeated, pausing significantly, “dead. Just dead.”

“That doesn’t make any f***ing sense! Why??”

A shot rang out and someone yelled from the stairs, “Don’t move! Put your hands up!” Quint grabbed up his swords dove over the railing. The black water swallowed him eagerly. He felt like he’d just been electrocuted. The water wasn’t cold, the water was liquid pain. His lungs imploded and felt like they’d been crushed in a vice. His mouth snapped open in a frozen, horrific death mask. Entangled by the weight of his coat and boots, he sank like a stone into the inky depths. As Quint’s heart slowed, the voices of the Others taunted him and applauded his failure. The voices chased his fading consciousness until soon, he heard nothing at all.

CHAPTER TEN: DEXION’S REWARD

The Palace of King Ptolemy XIII

Pelusium, Egypt

September 30, 48 BC

The acrid stench of fresh vomit wrenched at Dexion’s lungs as he stood before the chambers of Achilles the Eunuch. The sound of his armor must have given him away, for he heard an insistent grunt behind the door, and shuffling as he moved to open it.

“A moment,” Achilles croaked, his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat with a deep-chested gurgling noise, spat, and said again, “A moment, Roman. Wait.” The door opened, and the foul stench leapt from the room as a rushing wind from a bellows. Achilles emerged, looking sweaty and emaciated, but in a jovial mood. “Ah,” he exclaimed, clapping his hands, “Artorius Dexion. Is it time at last?”

“It is,” said Dexion. He noticed that Achilles’ smile was a fearsome thing, his bared teeth brown-black, pitted and shrunken as volcanic rock. He motioned his head down the hall. “I am bidden to bring you

with me. Your king summons you to be with him when Caesar arrives.

"Of course," Achillas said. "I thought as much when I saw you'd made yourself presentable for court." Dexion was not sure if he was being condescending or patronizing. Maybe neither; he'd often noted that the eunuch enjoyed hearing himself talk, particularly when the subject centered on his own ideas. Dexion wanted to get away from the room, so he stood to the side of the door and gestured for Achillas to lead the way. Perhaps he expected a laugh from the centurion. He hesitated to fix his clothes, then walked alongside Dexion.

Word of Gaius Julius Caesar's arrival had spread long before his ships had pulled into port. Dexion had moved his century south of the city with the others. He feared the rumors of Caesar's cruelty and the stories told by Septimius, and thought that his men might be slaughtered even if they laid down arms immediately upon Caesar's arrival. It was unlikely, but Dexion thought it prudent to remove them from the situation altogether. News of their impending surrender was poorly received by his men, and many of them had a foolhardy desire to see battle at least once before returning home. He had remained silent on the subject of Pompey's death, but surely they'd heard news of it. He nearly fled back to the city after giving his last orders, thinking that at any moment his men would discover that he had taken Pompey Magnus' head and kill him as a traitor.

None of it mattered now. It was done. Dexion resolved that he would return home and speak of nothing that happened here ever again. Even the promised rewards meant little to him, as long as it meant solitude and peace. He was no great warrior or politician. He was certainly no hero and felt that surely the gods would strike him down for his hypocrisy if he made any such claim. It was incredible how he missed the simple hardships of fatherhood, and longed for the tedium of a simple life. Everything he had done, he had done simply to hear his wife humming to herself as she prepared a meal, and to bounce his little daughter on his lap.

"What's this? A smile?" teased Achillas. Dexion's thoughts of home must have been written all over his face. "No it's all right, Dexion. I'll tell no one of this."

Septimius awaited them near the audience hall. He waved for them to approach. "I told you to hurry," he chastised.

"Calm yourself," Achillas said with an authoritative air that almost carried a threat. "For a king, Caesar will wait."

Septimius had his back turned to the Egyptian before he'd finished speaking and opened the doors. The audience chamber was a bustle of servants, most attending the boy-king Ptolemy with food or drink served in silver, or fanning him with garishly-colored exotic feathers and palm fronds. Others tended the lamps. Dexion noticed a close circle of four other men dressed and groomed much like Achillas. Their eyes were lined in black and they wore dark, expensive clothes of rich colors. All of them were shaved to their bare scalp. Achillas departed from his side and joined the other advisors, who barely seemed to notice his presence.

The king—what little Dexion could see of him through his coterie of attendants—was a boy, aged no more than twelve. A pudgy, lazy-looking child, he kept his lower lip thrust out in a pout in a frozen expression of displeasure and annoyance. His eyes were half-closed and drooping, head propped on his fist as though he could fall asleep at any moment. He was a spoiled creature of such sloth that Dexion felt ashamed and angry to be anywhere near him. Ptolemy tossed his finger at one of his servants, who responded by cramming a grape into the king's waiting mouth. Dexion exhaled with distaste and glanced around the room for Salvius, but could not find him.

A rush of air swept into the chamber as the large double-doors opened. His skin prickled sharply at the sensation, though the air was hot and smoky. He stared into the hazy distant hallway now revealed and saw the familiar shapes of armored Romans approaching. In their center strode a shorter but powerful-looking man, with narrow, bright eyes that Dexion could see even from where he stood. He was tanned and had clearly weathered many battles, but where some soldiers seemed frayed and worn, Gaius Julius Caesar seemed instead tempered and hardened. Dexion felt cornered, suddenly confronted with a man rightly feared by hardier men than he. Caesar's eyes were not unlike a hawk's, he thought, reflecting a soul of deadly efficiency.

As Caesar and his men approached, Dexion slowly realized that the room was still, and he no longer felt the presence of Septimius nearby; almost everyone in the room had drawn back towards the wall, leaving Dexion somewhat orphaned. Even Ptolemy's servants had parted so that they all might look upon Caesar; only two slaves carried on as if nothing had changed, waving their colorful feathered fans with precision time. They seemed asleep, their eyes flat and dreamless.

Achillas' sandals slapped loudly against the floor as he rushed forward to greet the Romans. He stooped and bowed in a humiliating show of obsequiousness "Welcome, sir, welcome! We—"

"Greetings." Caesar's eyes remained fixed on the king. The word was a harsh, sharp reflexive thing, at once an acknowledgement and a dismissal. Achillas wavered and tried to continue his practiced conciliatory speech, but before he could start, Caesar spoke again. "King Ptolemy." He gave a slight nod of his head.

Ptolemy seemed uncertain what to say, but he looked confounded and angry that this foreigner did not stoop and scrape for his favor. He spoke, and his voice cracked shrilly. "Welcome, Caesar. I had been waiting for your arrival."

"With much anticipation," Achillas completed the thought. "I've made all the necessary preparations to assure that you and your men are made most comfort—"

"Pompey Magnus," Caesar said, enunciating each word like the pounding of a war drum. His eyes turned for the first time on the eunuch, and Achillas shrank from his powerful gaze as if confronted with the naked sun. "Bring him to me. I want to see him."

"Ah," the eunuch searched his mind for the words. He was the sort used to dictating the conversation. When interrupted, he was forced to search for the most diplomatic way to begin a new thought. "But of

course. He arrived with several ships no more than a week ago.”

“He is here?”

“Yes! Yes,” Achillas laughed, his hand reaching out as if to clap Caesar reassuringly on his shoulder. He pulled his hand back at Caesar’s stony scowl.

“Pompey Magnus is an honored guest in my house!” Ptolemy grinned. The boy-king leaned forward in his throne. “And he would like to see you again as well.” Caesar looked weary, but focused. He said nothing, simply stared with an expression that brooked no absurdity. Ptolemy’s grin slipped, but he clapped his hands, determined not to break the festive spirit. “My gift to you, Caesar, in the name of peace and friendship between Egypt and Rome.”

The doors behind Dexion swung open, and Salvius strode inside with theatric grace. He bore in his hands an elaborate wrought bronze serving tray, as one might serve a hog at a feast. “And we, loyal Romans who wish to return to your service, bring this gift to you, sir.” He smiled to Dexion as he passed, then placed the tray upon a small table brought by servants.

Septimius put a hand to Dexion’s back and pushed him forward, whispering “Step forward, boy, now we can return home.” Dexion did this, standing in the center between his fellow centurions. He shared a smile with them, but soon his gaze was drawn to Caesar, who tore the cover from the tray and cast it aside. The cacophonous noise silenced all laughter, and everyone stared at Caesar. He was so tense that he looked brittle. Caesar’s teeth were bared in a seething look of horror, and it looked like he’d stopped breathing as he gazed upon the contents of the platter.

The head of Pompey Magnus, waxy and white, tipped lopsided against a pile of vegetables. His eyes were open and rolled back into his head. His mouth was forced open, a fruit wedged in his teeth. There was blood gathered amongst a carpet of greens, but it was old and viscous, now black with rot.

“He is...shorter than I thought,” Ptolemy cackled. He leaned back in his throne.

Caesar’s head snapped back up. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

Ptolemy’s was barely paying attention, his mouth open and awaiting a grape to be placed within. “Hm?”

Achillas tried to explain, his tone soothing. “We’ve brought you the head of your enemy. The man you’ve hunted across the sea. You are displeased?”

Caesar howled with a fury such that Dexion could feel it reverberate from the stone walls. He struck Achillas with the back of his fist. The shattering of the eunuch’s nose could easily be heard, and blood gushed from his nostrils as he fell. Ptolemy pushed himself off his throne and brought himself to his full, diminutive height.

“How dare you? I will not be in—“

"He was a consul! He was my friend!" Caesar raged. "He was the greatest of us, you coward."

"But..." Ptolemy shuffled in fear at the sight of Caesar's anger. "But you went to war with him. Why would you not seek his death?"

"Silence!" Caesar shouted down the king in his own palace, and the boy was hushed. He paced along the line of centurions, scrubbing his hand across the light stubble on his face. He spoke again to the king, "He was a loyal Roman. A good man. A true patriot. And you," he pointed a finger squarely at the Egyptian king, "You have made the gravest mistake of your brief life."

Ptolemy gawked, and for a time the only sound was of Achilles weeping as he crawled away to tend to his broken face. "I...but, but it was not my plan. These centurions! It was their plan. They came to me! They told me that you wanted Pompey dead!

Caesar looked to the centurions for the first time. He looked as if he wanted to spit at the sight of them. "Is this true?"

The centurions looked between each other, unsure of whom should speak. Septimius brought himself strict attention and spoke. "It is not, sir. It..."

Caesar silenced him with a quick wave. "It barely matters. Murderers and cowards. All I want to know is which of you swine struck the killing blow."

"It was Quintus Artorius Dexion, sir," exclaimed Salvius without hesitation.

Dexion shot his head over to look at Salvius in shock, mouth agape.

"It was Dexion, sir," agreed Septimius. He stepped to the side to distance himself from Dexion, and soon Dexion found himself alone once again. Dexion looked between his comrades and eventually realized that all eyes were on him, and Caesar had been staring at him for some time.

"Well?" Caesar asked.

Dexion could not bring himself to muster a rational excuse. "I...we thought it would earn your favor, sir. I wanted only to return home." Caesar exhaled at the first sound of Dexion's voice and turned away, visibly nauseated. Dexion wished he had said nothing.

"On your knees."

"Please. I have a wife. A child. I didn't know. We heard—"

Caesar's hands locked around Dexion's throat. Quintus looked desperately for help. He gripped Caesar's wrists, but the man was impossibly strong and driven with wrath. He could hear the sound of snapping

bone and the tearing of his esophagus. He felt the rolling, fiery sensation of blood sliding down his throat and coating his insides. He felt his knees strike the stone floor, but the sensation was distant and unimportant. His arms burned and went limp, and he could see little more than the black pupils of Caesar's eyes inches from his own. Dexion coughed, but his crushed windpipe allowed nothing to escape his lips. Soon, Quintus found himself drawn inside the blackness of Caesar's eyes, their dark centers his portals to the underworld.

All sounds faded except for the low pulse of his heart. It shrank. Slower. Fainter. After a long time it was gone.

Chapter Eleven: Codename Heimdall

Watcher Enclave Kokabiel-1

Near Rockland, Maine

October 31, 2004 – 7:00 PM

"Miss, this is private property. I'm gonna have to ask you to turn around right now."

Kelli clicked her gum in annoyance and propped her arm against the lowered glass of the car's power windows so he could see her Watcher tattoo. She barely heard him over the sound of the car's cheap stereo and the roar of the cheaper heater venting raw exhaust into the cab, which swirled in the crisp Maine air and swept right back outside. She didn't know what he was saying but guessed rightly he was asking for identification.

The guardsman, dressed in the fatigues of a private security firm that had a logo but no name, emerged from the gatehouse booth with an annoyed tug at the zipper of his Gore-Tex coat. "Miss, please turn your radio down."

Kelli gave an outraged "God!!" and rolled her eyes. She swatted the volume down. "The F***, man? It's F***in' cold out here."

"Miss, I'm going to need your clearance code."

"Again??"

"It's regulation. I'm afraid I don't recognize you." The man bent down to peer inside, and saw the car's other occupant. "Jack?"

Donahl craned his head down into view of the driver's window. He pulled the cap from his head, grinned, and stuck his hand out the window. "Nah but Oi recognize an ugly arseface like you even with that ridiculous thing you call a moustache, Rick!"

The guard's face lightened and he stepped forward to grasp Jack's hand. "Hey Jack. Thought it was you. Who's this?" He jerked a thumb in Kelli's direction.

"Oh that's Kelli. Picked her up a couple months back in Texas of all f***in' places. She's still Grigori. She'll be doin' me file 'n' log for a while."

"Right. Sign in, please." Jack took a proffered clipboard and scribbled on it briefly. "What's your business?"

Jack tugged his cap back on and took a moment to rub his hands in front of the heater. "Here to see Mr. Champley."

The guard gave a hesitant glance back inside his booth. "I think I would have remembered seeing you on that list."

"I'm not on the list. Call it in, lad. He wants to see me."

"I'm rolling the godd*** window up," Kelli griped.

"Kelli for f***'s sake—" but she'd already done it. Donahl dropped the act as soon as the window whirred shut. "Well done." The guard had gone back inside his booth to summon a higher authority on the radio.

"Jack this place is a fortress."

"The hardest part is over if he lets us inside. And he will."

"What's a Grigori?"

"It's an apprentice Watcher. Someone vetted and cleared but still needs a few years learnin' tradecraft. They do s*** work, logging and transcribing tapes, filing, data entry."

"Oh. You sure about this? I mean—"

"Positive. Once you're inside the assumption is that yeh belong. Jus' remember. I'm wired for sound. Wear your headphones, make like you're listening ta music. Just act like you belong. You're bored and pissed off that Oi'm makin' yeh work on Halloween and everyone will believe it and nobody'll glance at yeh twice. Yeh remember the codes I taught you?"

Kelli nodded, and was about to speak but the guard rapped his knuckles on the window, and she jumped. He gave a thumbs up and the heavy steel gates retracted on rails. Tire damage strips dropped back into their metal housings beyond this. The road wound into a dense, jagged wood of needled trees that made off-road travel impossible and blocked anyone's visibility to a few yards past the treeline. She could see no buildings from here; the road veered left after forty yards and was swallowed by the

woods. The failing sunlight gave the place a stygian look, its stretching shadows reaching like claws for the car. Kelli told herself that she was finding reasons to be nervous, that it was just stress and the notion that it was Halloween night that gave her these thoughts. She nudged the accelerator and turned on the high-beams, watchful for the Blair Witch.

They drove perhaps a mile, taking sweeping but perilous turns that required Kelli to drive slowly. The road was slick, sometimes patched with small mud-sludge piles of dirty snow, marked with tire tracks. She thought she saw slender metal spikes along the road at irregular intervals—perhaps a dozen on the way—that resembled highway mile markers but bore no ornamentation or signs. Perhaps they housed some kind of tracking electronics, and idly she wondered if the road itself through the woods served some defensive function. Did the Watchers have enemies willing and able to attack this place? Jack had said nothing on this matter, other than the idea that few knew of the Watchers' existence.

This also troubled her. How could any group this size maintain secrecy when the subjects of their voyeuristic hobby tended to leave blood, heads, broken katana swords, and enough broken glass to fill a garbage truck. She asked earlier, but all Jack would say was, "We're very careful with who we choose. Think about it." Just as she was thinking of a wiseass thing to say about how Jack got his Watcher tattoo, he shot her a stern look and she decided not to pursue the matter.

She flexed her cold hands on the steering wheel. "What happens if we get caught?"

"Don' get caught."

"But what—"

"Don'. Get. Caught. One dark secret we pride ourselves on is our skill in disposin' of bodies. And they're not all Immortals, girl. There's nae due process on this side of the lookin' glass."

"Rousseau-- the dead man in my dorm room," she exclaimed, "you took it away?" Donahl met her stare but only frowned.

Their car cleared the treeline on the other side, and before them stretched a large estate that reminded Kelli of Wayne Manor, but only because it was the only type of mansion she was familiar with. It was clearly old, 19th century architecture, she guessed. The walls were limestone, the bottom story ringed with stout pillars. Several chimneys extended from the red terra cotta roof five floors above ground level. A field surrounded the estate for perhaps a full eighth of a mile, clear of any foliage except neatly-maintained grass. The only thing that decorated the lawn were tall light poles, with four bright floodlights aimed downward in opposite directions. They were off at the moment, but Kelli imagined that the night shift would turn them on any second now that the sun was down. It didn't seem to have a holographic cave wall, but this place did look much more fortified than Wayne Manor ever did.

. "S***. S***, this is stupid." Kelli knuckled the stiffness from her wrists.

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "But who wants to live forever?"

“Jack, thank God,” said Erik Champley. He leaned his cigar against a stone ashtray and stood. He was a hard, tight-faced man, with a slightly-reptilian appearance that made him look much younger than he was. In reality, he was probably in his mid seventies but still appeared tough and hearty—one of those old CIA dogs of war that neither burned out or faded away, they just got craftier and awaited Satan to come up himself to collect their souls. Donahl reckoned that Champley wasn’t immortal, just too smart to die.

“We heard about Jason Vaughn, and we thought...”

Donahl stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and made no effort to conceal his suspicious look.

“Why didn’t you report in, Jack?”

“I’m here. Aren’t I?”

Champley grabbed up his cigar and sat on the edge of his desk. “You know what I mean. Rousseau’s dead. Vaughn’s dead. Three dead swordsmen in black who boarded an Alaskan tour ship in a rowboat. Do you have any idea what it’s like trying to kill a news story that has a headline like ‘Ninja Pirate Massacre’?” It was a feeble attempt at a joke, but Jack’s scowl didn’t break.

Donahl sighed and tossed open an oaken humidor on the desk and took up a cigar. He idly searched for a trim and a light.

“What happened, Jack?”

“I’m jus’ gonna sit here and smoke until yeh stop treating me like a F***in’ child and start givin’ me some answers. Maybe check out all these fine paintings you got.” Donahl gestured around the room with the end of his cigar at the artwork that adorned the wood-paneled walls. Baroque art, mostly, the kind that would seem at home in old English manors. A gigantic Persian rug swept across the floor in front of Champley’s impressive oak desk. The weight of the thing was such that it must have taken six men to haul into the room.

“Where is Quint, Jack? Why aren’t you with him?”

Donahl smacked his hand against the desk and gave Champley a manic grin. “At’s the spirit, that’s the question you really want the answer to, isn’t it? Where is Quint? Maybe it’s best that I don’t know, eh?”

“Jack,” Champley said after a pause, “I can’t help you if I don’t understand why you’re upset. All we know is that Quint took Rousseau’s head and has left a trail of bodies in his wake. And Rousseau’s Watcher—”

“Tried to kill me, Erik. Not only that, he tried to cover it up by making it look like a hit by the IRA. The Semtex was a nice touch, mate. After all, we Irishmen love a good grudge and nobody would doubt that I had it coming.” Donahl withdrew his pistol from his coat and cocked it.

“What are you—”

“Now,” Donahl knuckled out an itch on his forehead, “You were the one who turned me into the Watchers. And you’re one of, what, seven people who have full access to my records? One of the few people who knows that dying with a homemade anti-personnel device shoved up his arse is a fitting end for Jack Donahl. So...”

Champley had paled and frozen stiff. Ashes fell unheeded from the end of his cigar to the rug. “So?”

“I’m listening.”

Champley wet his lips and set his cigar down once again. He stood to face the window that overlooked the west side of the estate. “I was outvoted, Jack. I asked them not to have you terminated. The Watchers’ Council, I mean. I told them they could trust you, that you’d understand.”

“Understand?”

“They wanted someone absolutely reliable to shadow Quint. Someone answerable only to the Council. They couldn’t reassign you because they thought you’d get suspicious and poke around into it. They couldn’t take the chance.”

Donahl exhaled and tried to sound patient, but his stomach felt uneasy. He felt more and more like he didn’t want to hear this, that he should just run from the room and hide. It would be smarter, but he had to know. “The Immortals aren’t playing by the rules of the game anymore, Erik, and neither are the Watchers. I need to know why.”

Champley turned his head to look sidelong at Donahl, his voice monotone. “Oh, but this is part of the game, Jack. The endgame. Quintus Artorius Dexion must die. And the word is out to almost every Immortal around the world.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Oh yes you can.”

“You can’t leave this place. You’ll warn Quint. You’ll drive him into hiding. That can’t happen.”

Donahl pushed forward and stuck the barrel of his gun under Champley’s jaw. “What makes Quint so special? Hm? Why him? I’ve watched him for the better part of a decade.”

Champley's throat was dry, and he was beginning to sweat. But his voice was steady, considering the circumstances. "You don't know who Quint really is. You've never had full access to the file. There were...sections...expurgations, so to speak. It's done for most of the eldest Immortals."

"Quit stalling. Talk."

"The files are available only to the Watcher's Council. Archived under code names. In the last year we uncovered records from our agents in the Vatican. Ancient records, you..." he gave a weak laugh, "you have no idea. We spent months analyzing and verifying it. When we were done, Quint's file was reclassified and codenamed Heimdall."

"Heimdall, huh. You're not telling me anything, and I'm getting antsy, mate."

"Heimdall is the Norse god of light, guardian of Asgard. The sounding of his horn signals the coming of Ragnarok. The final battle of the gods." Champley stepped around Donahl and slumped into his leatherback chair. He plucked the cap from a large glass decanter of scotch and poured himself a glass.

"He's—wait."

"Have you never wondered how all this would end? The killing? How can there ever be an end when new Immortals are found every few months? How can there be only one if that's the case? Quint is the catalyst."

"You can't possibly know that," Donahl said, pacing the room. "You can't."

"Quint's death will usher in The Gathering: the final battle between the Immortals."

"And all of yeh just decided to say bollocks to your non-interference policy and usher in your own little Ragnarok, eh?"

Champley stared into his drink. "What are you going to do?"

"Gonna get far away from here." Donahl swung his arm back and crashed the butt of his gun into Champley's head. The man raised an arm to block it but lost his balance and fell, only to be hit again. Donahl backed toward the door, pocketing his gun. "The lot of yeh are completely out of your bloody minds. Anyway, thanks for the cigar."

It took Champley a minute to even realize where his chair was, and a couple more before he could sit up without wanting to vomit. He tossed back the rest of his drink and punched some buttons on his phone. Donahl was gone. He coughed, searching for a handkerchief to press against his bleeding head. "Security checkpoints, this is Erik Champley. Close the gates. Put all patrols on alert and detain Jack Donahl. He's armed, repeat armed and a well-trained soldier. Exercise caution."

Various patrols and checkpoints acknowledged the order. Finally, the speakerphone crackled to life again. "This is the main gatehouse," Champley heard. "What about the Grigori?"

"The Grigori?"

"With Donahl. The one who said she was going to the computer archives to log some file footage." He could hear the guard flip a page on his clipboard. "Yeah, here it is: Kelli Green."

Champley threw his glass across the room, shattering it against the heavy doors. Donahl had an exit strategy or he never would have come. And worse, he'd just sent someone into the Watcher archives with his access codes and about ten minutes free reign. "Kill them both. They can't leave the estate alive."

He felt, rather than heard, a sudden thump deep in his heart. The shock of an explosion shook the glass as it shattered the tranquil night air. Champley spun around to look out the window, and saw a distant point in the dark treeline blossom into a fireball. The gate had been destroyed.

Champley poured himself another drink.

Chapter Twelve: Reawakening

Somewhere south of Juneau, Alaska near the British Columbian border

October 28, 2004 – 8:13 AM

He was not cold. And after a long time, there came a point when he stopped feeling pain. He did not notice the abyssal blackness or feel the tearing, wrenching spasming of his own muscles. He felt nothing, thought nothing. He merely continued, aware only dimly of that thing in the center of his soul that dangled at the end of the darkness at the end of the tunnel. The voices of the Others pleaded for his death. But soon even they grew silent, waiting.

His heart contracted, fluttered, and wrenched itself open. He screamed, and thought it must be because of pain. Each pulsing beat dragged him wailing back from the edge of Hell, and he realized that he cried out because he longed to embrace his final end. But he could have stopped moving. He could have fallen and refused to continue. Mud would cover his body, burying him forever away from his never-ending battles. It would be easy. Yet he crawled on, and he did not know why.

"Hey mister, are you—"

"Is that guy all right?"

"Mister?"

“My god, look at him. Would someone stop him?”

“I got him. Someone help me over here!”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know. Does—he’s thrashing! Hold him down! Does anyone have a cell phone or something?”

“I got one.”

“Get him in a car!”

“Blankets, we need blankets.”

“Not in my car.”

“Oh come on, Ty.”

“He won’t stop shaking.”

“He’s barely got a pulse. I don’t think he’s going to make it.”

“You’re not checking the right place.”

“I’m f***ing—I’m checking the right f***ing place, now would you call an ambulance?”

“Why did he tear his hair out? It’s all in his hands.”

“I dunno, maybe to try and keep from convulsing.”

“I can’t get a signal out here.”

“Okay put him in the back.”

“But—“

“Dude, just drive the f***ing car back to town so we can try to find a hospital or something.”

His eyes could not open; they felt frozen shut. His fists were clenched, pinned under his armpits. He knew, because he could feel his blood circulating through his numbed limbs. The feeling all over his body was a fiery rush a million times worse than sleeping on his arm all night.

“Hold his head steady; he’ll break his own neck!”

"Put the sleeping bags back over him!"

"I know but look at the scars all over him. Eew, look at that one. Look!"

"Mister?" Someone was shaking his arm. "We're taking you to a hospital. Just hang in there, okay? We're gonna warm you up."

"No doctors," he groaned. "No doctors."

"What did he say?"

"Do you speak English?"

"Maybe he's Cucknadian."

"So?"

"So maybe he speaks French."

"Do you speak French?"

"No."

There was a pause. "He got ID?" Someone started rifling through his clothes.

"Yeah. Dexter Quint from New York."

"New York?"

Dexter Quint. That was his name now. Dex Quint. He must have regressed to speaking in his old Latin tongue. It was the language he often spoke in his dreams. Sometimes he found himself thinking in his old language and wondering why the words still felt so fresh to him.

"No doctors, please," he repeated in English. His teeth rattled together and he only barely mustered the strength to speak the words clearly before the spasms took over again. He pulled his arms tighter around his body.

"Just lay back."

Quint's head shot back and forth. He'd lost his sword. He'd lost everything on that ferry. His Walkman was gone. He groaned and fell back against the seat to tremor a while.

"What happened to you out there?" the driver asked. He was a clean-cut collegiate, driving his parents' car and probably attending school on their dime. He looked the type, at least.

"Why do you have scars all over you?" peeped the boy's companion in the passenger seat—a meek young lady who seemed fresh out of high school. She made no effort to mask her wondering stare at the half-frozen man in the back seat.

"I'm a hunter."

"What," laughed the driver, "like bears?"

"Big game, yeah. Listen," Quint clenched his jaw, summoning his strength to lean forward. With much effort, he did so. "I don't need a hospital. You can drop me off somewhere before town. I have someone I can call."

The four others in the car looked at each other doubtfully. "You look like sh**, man," said a frazzled, unshaven student that sat next to him. Another girl, probably his girlfriend, huddled against the door enveloped in a bulky coat. "You sure?"

He nodded. "I'll also need some clothes. A coat, shoes, anything. I'll pay you."

"He does look a lot better," observed the girl in the front seat. "Except his hair is all messed up."

The driver shrugged. "We'll stop at the next place I see and talk about it."

"As long as it's got an ATM," Quint mumbled, deciding to spend the intervening time passed out. "And coffee." He closed his eyes.

But the Others would not let him sleep.

Chapter Thirteen: Cinders, Ashes, Dust

Adelphi Theater

Boston, Massachusetts

November 9, 1872 – 6:35 PM

She eyed Quint with a curious amusement, as one might condescendingly stare at a young child attempting to lie about eating sweets before dinner. She bit her lip and seemed on the verge of laughing, but held it back to spare his feelings. Finally Quint could stand no more and he turned his head to look at her as they walked.

"What?"

"Nothing." She faced forward and they turned east, roughly in the direction of their hotel. The crowd

from the theater headed elsewhere, their raucous laughter soon fading behind them. Boys ran the streets, illuminating the gaslight poles before it grew darker. Soon the streets were quiet, aside from the sound of their own quiet footfalls. Few horses and carriages clattered down the streets; horse flu had been a great trouble lately. Quint didn't mind the walk.

Her eyes were on him again. He could see her head turn, her wide brown eyes gazing at him with that damned annoying look with one eyebrow cocked upward. He tried to hate it. "What? What is it?"

"Nothing!" She tried to bluff a straight face, but her voice broke into a tittering laugh. She slipped her arm around his and gently stroked his forearm with her finger. She probably didn't even know she was doing it, but he noticed it almost with a note of alarm. He wasn't used to company, and she knew that.

"I thought the show was quite good," he grumbled. "I admit we were a bit over-dressed for the occasion."

"Oh indeed?" she teased. "I thought burlesque shows required formal attire."

"It wasn't burlesque. There was a fellow who did a rather good recital of scenes from 'Richard III'..." Quint trailed off miserably.

"With puppets."

"Marionettes," he corrected. "I didn't know the theater had changed its format so radically. And besides, we didn't have to go inside. You saw the type of people milling about outside. You saw the posters with the...um, well the show playbill. We could have gone elsewhere. Don't blame me."

She leaned against his arm and squeezed him close. "And miss out on—how did you put it?—'taking in a little culture?' Never."

Quint stopped. He dipped his head down and sighed. "I'm sorry, Constance. I'm not any good at this."

Constance put a hand to his cheek and turned him gently towards her. She just looked at him, searching his eyes, "How old are you, Quint? I mean, really."

"About 1,800 years. I'm not certain."

"You always look so sad all the time. You're a good man, Quint. I've known you long enough to know that. I've seen you laugh. But sometimes I can look at you and see you get lost in those centuries of memories you keep bottled inside of you. It almost looks like you're drowning."

"I'm not a good man. I've done things...things...you can't—"

She scowled, suddenly angered. "I can't understand? Was that what you were going to say? Maybe I should tell you just how much more alone and afraid it feels to crawl out of your own grave, a hunted

woman with no weapons and no training to use them. What I had to do..." she turned away to glance down the street so Quint couldn't see the tears welling in her eyes. "Don't ever say that I wouldn't understand. I have six hundred years of my own regrets."

Quint felt his face beginning to flush. He scratched his ear for a moment in consternation. "I forget sometimes that you come from the sort of upbringing that doesn't take kindly to contradiction."

"I've had men hung for less in my old life," she smirked, blinking away her tears. He wasn't sure if she was joking. That was why Constance frightened him. She had her own coldness about her sometimes. Quint didn't doubt that her survival thus far was earned in blood bitterly fought for.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, "I'm...It's hard to live with some of the things I've done. I guess we all have our regrets."

They looked at each other for a long while, frozen in time and unable to think of anything fitting or proper to say. Neither was able to make a move, too proud and fearful to act. Quint laughed, gazing to the sky for aid.

"How many times have we been standing together just like this?"

Constance quirked her brow again and made a wry face. "Altogether? Nine. Six of those ruined by you."

"Six?" Quint gawked, "You're not counting the fox hunt in 1552, are you? Because that was not my fault."

"You are such a bullheaded, lying fool."

"Technically we weren't standing. I was on a horse, and I fell off."

Constance scowled.

"You spooked the horse," he insisted. "I hit my head on a stone."

"I should have just finished you off right there!" She crossed her arms and tried not to smile. "I could have. I tell that to everyone who knows you. Makes them terribly envious."

Quint sighed. "I should have stayed with you in Calais the first time we met."

"I should have asked you not to go. One more regret for each of us."

He took her hands. "No more regrets." Constance flowed into his arms and pulled him close. Her body was warm and muscular, her embrace strong but comforting. They kissed hungrily—a longing kiss to make up for uncounted years of lost time. When they finally came up for air, they nuzzled each other close. Quint was nearly dizzy; his heart raced. He closed his eyes and stroked her hair, relishing the feel

of her hot breath on his neck.

“So are you going to ask me to stay?”

She gave his face a playful swat. He could scarcely believe that eyes so perfectly blue could exist in this world; he had never seen a color so deep and regal in his life except on the sea. He kissed her again before he got lost in them.

“Take me home, Quint.”

Constance sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed with Quint’s swords across her knees. She stared at Quint for a seemingly interminable time, whose breathing was shallow and gentle. He was so drugged now that a child could have finished him. She dragged a hand through her hair, face burning with horror and humiliation. The moonlight caught the edges of the paired makhaira blades and flashed painfully into her eyes. She crushed her eyes shut to keep her tears from escaping.

Her skin prickled as if she had been doused in cold water. Constance expected them sooner. She looked to the window, her attention drawn by impulse to the approach of other Immortals. Quint stirred, but would be unable to move under his own power when they came. A scratching came up a drainage pipe outside, and Constance saw a strange furry white face appear through the window. The monkey smacked its palm against the glass. A second later, a man’s gloved hand pulled the window open.

“I understand that you love this one,” he said as he perched on the windowsill. He was garbed and hooded in black, a headband with a silver medal in the center glinting white in the intense light of the moon. His narrow eyes were shadowed and dim. “It is why Quintus was chosen for you.”

Constance threw the Greek-styled smallswords to the wooden floor and buried her head in her hands. The man in black entered the room, unperturbed by her reaction. The monkey chirped quietly and scurried up the bed’s headboard to peer down on Quint’s body. It nibbled on the ends of its fingers, running back and forth as the man stood over Constance. “You have killed dozens, Constance. The very purpose of this exercise is to prove that this man is no different.”

“Not this one, Kage,” she insisted, “Not this one. I’ll kill anyone else.”

Kage picked up her sword and placed it next to her. “You don’t get to choose. None of us do. Again, that is the purpose of your initiation. Finish him.”

“No.”

He kneeled down to look in her eyes. “Think on this carefully. You are a magnificent weapon, beautiful and deadly. You have grace and skill. You have shown that you are a survivor. We chose you because we believe you can be worthy of fighting for the Prize when only we Dragons remain.”

She took her sword and stood to face the man in black. Kage folded his hands behind his back. "Suddenly the idea of trusting a desperate pack of assassins doesn't appeal to me."

Kage's laugh was like the sound of broken pottery, hoarse and jagged. "We're offering a chance for order out of this chaos. When the Gathering begins, we will sweep the land clear of our enemies as one force. Until that day, you would have protection. Money. Comfort. Power. When we are the last, then we will have a grand tournament to decide the Prize. We settle it as intended, with honor and humility. You don't have to be afraid anymore, Constance."

Both turned at the sound of a gurgling low in Quint's throat. He looked delirious, glassy eyes searching for his weapons. Kage laughed and pulled him upright by his hair. Quint tried to raise his hand to free himself, but the effort it took to even consider it made his head swim so much he nearly fainted.

"What about you, hm?" he breathed into Quint's ear. "Maybe you'd like to kill her yourself now? You are a far older and more powerful Immortal by far." Kage angled Quint's head to look at Constance, "I think that I made the offer to the wrong person. But I'll make it now. I know you're too weak to grasp a sword, Quintus, but you can take her place with us. Just ask, and I will take her head in your name. Unlike her, I think you have the intelligence to recognize opportunity, and the will to seize it. Strength and honor, Roman."

Quint's eyes rolled back in his head. He strained to focus on Constance, who stood at the back of the room, listening, but she could not meet his gaze. He shook his head. Kage covered Quint's face with his hand and rammed the back of his head into the headboard. He pulled Quint upright again, anger entering his voice for the first time.

"Is it a fair fight you want with her? Is that it? I can let you have that. She betrayed you. She tried to murder you in your sleep, just like so many other Immortals that she's fooled."

"Stop it, Kage," she shouted, "He doesn't need to hear this."

"She's very good at being a black widow. If you only knew how many men came before you. She had their fun with them, let them ravage her body again, and again..."

"Stop it!!"

"...and again." Kage threw Quint trembling to the floor. "You were lucky to escape her trap for this long. Constance isn't even her real name, did you know that? Nobody knows what it is."

Quint smacked his fist against the floor, moaning like a dying animal. Constance—whoever she was—rushed forward and knelt down before him. She touched his arm and tried to hold him.

"Everything she ever told you was a lie," Kage persisted. "Had I spoken to her a few years earlier, she wouldn't have hesitated to kill you."

"I remember..." Quint whispered dreamily to Constance, "falling off my horse. You tried to help me up and fell in a creek..."

Constance took up Quint's swords and stood. She pointed the point of a blade at Kage. She could see the corners of his mouth turn up in a smile through his black mask. He leaned with his back against the wall and held his arm out to the bed as a perch for the white-faced monkey he kept as a pet. It scurried up to his shoulder and peeked fearfully at Constance, shrieking in alarm.

Constance suddenly felt a panicked, primal urge to flee. Every nerve in her body felt as if it were being scrubbed raw. Immortals were coming, more than she ever thought would congregate in one spot. She looked at the door, the windows, and Kage. "What is this?"

"No single warrior can stand against the combined might of the Six Dragons," he reminded her. "We fight as one."

The door swung open. The glass from the windows broke inward as grappling hooks snared the sills. Three figures clad entirely in black, harsh shadows against the moonlight, strode quietly into the room on padded feet. Two more vaulted through the window. They all bore identical straight blades and silver emblems on their headbands. Their vestments and weapons were Japanese in nature, but Constance could see that not all of the men and women that formed their ranks were.

Constance tossed the makhaira blades in her hands to test their weight. The six black-garbed figures reached back over their shoulders in unison and unsheathed their swords. They sank low into their battle stance. She flipped the blade in her left hand into a reverse grip.

"You can't be serious," scoffed Kage.

"Quint? I'm sorry."

Constance whirled away from Kage and threw one of her swords sidearm into the circle of Dragons. It crashed awkwardly into the ribs of one man, buried to the hilt like a cleaver in a flank of meat. The stricken Dragon stumbled to the side from the force of the blow, staring in shock at his grievous wound. The circle closed immediately, all moving in for a thrust to skewer her in the center of five swords. Constance took a two-step running leap and swung around the bedpost. Her shin connected with the back of a woman's head. She landed behind the group, hacked her sword down into the woman's spine at the base of her neck, and reached back to wrench her sword from the other Dragon's torso.

The female Dragon dropped to her knees, head lolling unnaturally forward because of her severed spinal column. Constance sidestepped the clumsy thrust of her wounded attacker, gripped his arm and pivoted on her leg. She threw him sidelong into the group just as they were regrouping. Her blades scythed down together at the woman's neck, easily severing the thin bones and connecting tissue that still kept her head attached.

Storm clouds began to gather outside, in what used to be a clear starry sky. They were black and thick,

the sort that marched at the head of hurricanes. Ice and hail began to rain through the broken windows. There would be no quickening yet; the battle was still ongoing. For every Immortal slain, the furious storm would continue to grow more dangerous, more damaging and terrible. The final quickening would only occur when the fight was finished. Until then, destruction would reign. It was called a godstorm among those unlucky few who had ever survived to witness one. Constance had only heard of one from Quint's old stories. He was a king in those days, he had said, and the godstorm wrought by the eight slain immortals that night left an entire castle and the surrounding lands in ruins. A king...she'd never know what he'd meant by that.

She spat on the corpse and gave them a mocking grin. The other Dragons shouted for blood and rushed forward to attack, just as Constance had hoped. She ducked out onto the edge of the window and scurried up to the roof from the top floor of the hotel. Her nightgown was soaked through instantly. Hail clattered against the flats of her swords. She swung her leg up over the angled roof and rolled up. The Dragons were close behind, and she hoped they had forgotten Quint and left him alone in the room.

A masked face peered over the edge of the roof, so she planted her heel between its eyes and sent the man screaming four stories down to the stone streets below. The scream choked off with an abrupt, wet splatter. The others emerged from the building and the other windows. Constance hurried to the top of the wedge formed by the roof's opposing slopes. Small decorative glass spheres lined the edges of the building and the central brace, rattling uncertainly in the growing storm winds. They housed lightning rods. She could see the jagged white arcs clash between the thunderheads; soon they would be upon the building itself.

The Dragons surrounded her again, taking careful, planned steps up the steep shingles. Kage shouted over the howling air, "Many will remember this night!"

It was a ruse to draw her attention. She turned and crossed her blades low to deflect a thrust to her abdomen. Two more moved in to flank her. She swung a leg back between the legs of one Dragon, halting his charge. Despite her attempt to drop beneath the attack of the third, a sword raked across her shoulders. She was down, but there were six legs around her and she hacked at them all. Her swings were reckless, but one fell howling with a severed calf muscle. He slid down the roof and scrambled to catch himself, losing his sword in his desperate attempt to get a grip.

She spent too much time in one place; one of her arms erupted in pain that reverberated through her bones like a tuning fork. Kage tore his sword free of her arm. Constance rolled to her back and wheel-kicked him under his jaw. The Dragon leader's body snapped backwards and fell, crashing atop one of the glass globes. It collapsed like thin paper under his weight, the lightning rod within blooming through his sternum like a grotesque bloody rose.

The two standing Dragons—a man and a woman-- looked at each other uncertainly and hesitated, allowing her to stand. Constance's wounded arm still gripped a sword, but it hung useless at her side. Kage made senseless gurgling cries, unable to extricate himself. They ran to either side of him and tried to pull him free of the lightning rod.

The man with the wounded leg crawled back to the middle of the roof, so intent on avoiding the fall that he didn't notice he'd crawled right to her feet. Constance angled the edge of a sword against the back of his neck and gave the blunt edge several brutal kicks. His head rolled off one side of the roof, the rest of his body down the other.

Thunder clapped so hard that the noise made her double over to cover her ears. A sword dropped from her bleeding hand and fell away, out of sight. Lightning rampaged down all around them. It struck the glass globes one at a time, blasting them outward in sprays of tiny shards like dandelion spores amidst charred splinters. Each strike created a flaming hole in the wooden shingles, which spread rapidly into the building below. The wind whipped savagely like a tornado around the hotel, causing the flames to grow despite the hail. The Dragons lifted Kage from the spike, but at that moment a blinding pillar of light coursed through his chest and arced into the central lightning rod. The Dragons shrieked and fell back, weaponless and numb. Kage's clothes were sheathed in flame; he groped blindly for aid, and Constance could see bubbling milky fluid gout from hollow sockets in his face. His eyes had burst in his own head. .

Half-blind from the lightning, Constance felt her way across the roof, following the smell of scorched meat and burnt hair. Kage's plasma-encrusted hand pawed at her leg. His moaning was airy, asthmatic and dry. She ended his pain as quickly as she could.

A wind stronger than any gust before it took out her legs from underneath her, and she fell. It was all she could do to grab some debris to keep from falling. She'd lost track of the other Dragons; the flames and lightning and spoiled her night vision completely. Shouts came from the awakening hotel below. She saw the fire leap to a nearby warehouse building. On the other side, a restaurant began to burn. The building trembled beneath her knees, but Constance could no longer tell if it was really the building or her own trembling body. Now she understood why Immortals made it a rule to battle one-on-one—why many saw it as one of the few crimes that still applied to their kind. The devastation seemed like divine retribution.

She backed up the roof, surrounded on all sides by the blaze. She thought about leaping from the roof when she felt a sword enter her back. Someone gripped her by the hair and pulled her head upwards to slice her jugular. Constance threw her elbow back to hit her attacker, but she was too slow, too weak. A snapping sound accompanied a sharp kick to the side of her knee. The Dragon behind her took her arm and wrestled her down with a martial arts throw. He bent her arm backwards to break it at the elbow.

She heard more footsteps. The numbers had caught up with her at last.

"Drop your sword," she heard beside her. The voice was feminine with a strange mixture of eastern accents. "It is over."

She struggled, and the stronger man craned her arm further back. She refused to release her weapon, screaming defiantly as she felt her joint snap away. The woman barked out a kiai and sliced into her shoulder. Another blow sundered her arm apart. The sword clattered from her severed hand, which the

male Dragon dropped before her. Unsupported, beaten, she sagged limply to the ground.

"There," the man gloated, "Was that so hard? Be still, now. Accept your death with honor." Constance gave him a final defiant look and spat blood on his leg. The Dragons raised their swords in unison to strike her down.

Out of the fire, Quint crawled, each dragging push forward accompanied by a guttural grunt of exertion. The Dragons turned too late; Quint hurled himself headlong to tackle the surprised Immortals. They hit the roof hard in a tangled mess of limbs, and slid in a tumble towards the perilous drop below.

She saw Quint wrestle them in shadow against the flames. He fought in a delirious frenzy, hacking, biting, kicking even though the left side of his body was covered in flames. Constance tried to call out to him but one of her lungs had collapsed. She reached out a hand to touch him. He was too far away to help.

The roof creaked ominously for a second, trembled, and collapsed beneath them like a house of cards.

Quint could barely breathe for all the ash that choked the air; it drifted like gray snowflakes in front of him. All around him, all he could see were flames. The wind blew like a gale, strong enough to knock him down at times. The hotel was a charred pile of timbers, sticking up from the ground like the broken ribs of a dinosaur. But the city of Boston was not finished burning; it had only just begun.

He called out for Constance again, his gait hampered by the treacherous underfoot and a leg he was sure was broken. Nobody else lived. The Dragons had fled or were buried beneath the wreckage, and the mortals had since run for safer ground or gone to help the fire brigade.

A hand brushed his leg. It was coated in dark blood, crusted by the fire to a black scabby stain. It was missing several fingers. Quint knelt down and threw aside everything he could to unearth her. She had been pinned beneath a heavy crossbeam that had supported the roof, now fallen across her abdomen. Constance's eyes were unfocused, bloodshot from smoke and trauma.

"My name is Marie," she said. "It's the only thing I've ever told you that was true."

Quint tried to lift the beam from her body and saw how badly she had been harmed as he cleared the debris away. "Your arm..."

She made a smiling face as if she'd misplaced a hairpin. "Gone now...maybe it'll turn up."

Another gust sent a cloud of ash to cover them. Lightning pealed across the sky. Quint stared up at it. "The godstorm hasn't stopped. Why not? The fight is over."

"Is it?"

“What are you saying? Consta— Marie? Marie?”

She frowned at him. “Look at me. I can’t fight anyone anymore. I’m useless.”

“Don’t say that. Come on, we can still leave here. I can—”

“It won’t end. You know that, Quint. It never ends. I won’t be protected. Just...just understand that this is what I want.”

Quint glanced at the sword he’d found on the street and set it aside. “No. You don’t deserve that. You can’t believe that.”

Marie tried to sit upright but could only elevate her head slightly. “I won’t be your pet, Quint. I won’t beg. I am asking you now, and that should be enough. Make it clean. Then walk away.”

Quint shouted down at her, “I’ve killed enough to damn my soul ten times over.”

“Then what’s one more?”

“No!!” He tried to walk away but he stopped himself before he’d gone more than two paces. He pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes, crying out in anguish. He looked back at her, “Why do you want this? We could be happy. We could be together. There’s no end to this. This life is forever.”

“Do you remember the poem I read to you by the river?” Marie smiled, “‘I long to believe in immortality. If I am destined to be happy with you here-- how short is the longest life. I wish to believe in immortality-- I wish to live with you forever.’ This way, I can be with you. I can still help you.”

The godstorm seemed to pull back, holding its breath. The clouds churned overhead to converge high above the hotel. Smoke plumed from the burning skyline and was pulled into the center of the maelstrom. Marie. That was her name.

Quint took up the sword.

Chapter 14: I don't have any remnants of what I saw in the past

The Sanitarium Club

Kabukicho, the red light district of Shinjuku Eastmouth

Tokyo, Japan

November 3, 2004 – 1:03 AM

((note: this is Spoonys gospel on the nihongo moonspeak, but I'll rather take Voices' Hentai-wisdom for it) * "Byōchū Taikyō" ("Invalid Facing Mirror"), a haiku by Masaoka Shiki, translated by Janine Beichman. It translates to "The man I used to meet in the mirror is no more / Now I see a wasted face. / It dribbles tears.")

The entire district was a migraine headache made manifest. It wasn't a red light district, so much as it was a neon light pi**hole that stank of sex and rat sh**. There wasn't a safe place to direct his eyes; the neon lights were everywhere and all vying to catch the eyes of apathetic wanderers. The lights that worked sported clashing colors, too bright to look directly at and searing terrible afterimages on his retinas when his gaze lingered. The other lights never failed completely, but buzzed and flickered, giving the entire alley a mind-twisting strobe effect of battling primary colors and a disharmonic aural drone that set his teeth on edge.

The street was based entirely on catering to the impulse-buy. Beer, cigarettes, a cheap f*** and entire stores choked to the ceiling with dirty mags and porn on DVD. This wasn't the kind of place anyone went to enjoy themselves; it was more a place to merely subsist and sate one's urges. A pit of vices lit by neon, paced by hollow-eyed wraiths looking for a sign amongst all the throbbing icons that might trigger some genuine emotion that hadn't been burnt out long ago.

The air was hazy and warm with oily steam from the roadside open-air ramen carts and roaming weather fronts of carcinogenic secondhand smoke. Quint had never seen so many people smoking cigarettes. He had one dangling from his lips in an effort to blend in; most people took him for a slumming American. He passed The Sanitarium again, an inconspicuous little corner crushed under the urban sprawl. The entrance was nothing more than a jagged, steep stairway wedged between a couple charge-by-the-hour no-tell motels. The stairs led down into a deeper level of the Japanese underworld, a choking tunnel that ended in an aura of sickly fluorescent lights that cast an off-green glow instead of white. It made the place look coated with mildew.

The Sanitarium was a nightclub made no effort to advertise other than a small white sign with the international symbol of the red cross. It wasn't the kind of place people wandered into or waited in line to pay a cover charge; knowing that The Sanitarium existed was proof enough that you belonged there. And if you belonged there, that meant you were a special guest of the friendly neighborhood Yakuza clan—in this case, the Three Immortal Dragons. Most figured the name was strange and even a little redundant, but few knew the truth of the Dragons' leadership: Immortals who pooled their resources and talents to organize an empire of crime and assassination.

They were brazen scum, flaunting tradition and breaking all the rules. They were almost

untouchable because they had no compunctions about hiding behind their mob of mortal triggermen. Who would tell them otherwise? Quint wasn't aware of many Immortals willing to start a war in an attempt to enforce an antiquated code of civilized murdering conduct. Quint wasn't here to deliver a public service announcement either; he'd just stopped giving a sh** completely. By now, the Dragons certainly knew that their attack on the cruise ship had failed and probably figured Quint would go to ground and hide. It was the smart thing to do. But hiding wouldn't work without any safe havens and he didn't consider himself that smart anyway.

A lone Japanese man stood under the sign at the top of the stairs, arms crossed and wearing sunglasses, even at this time of night. In his tailored suit, his position and posture had all the subtlety of an American Secret Service agent as he scanned the crowds. He stuck out like an Indian statue in a cigar shop, a proud Yakuza soldier doing his part by looking badass with all the confidence a .45 under his jacket can bring.

He walked up to the bouncer. "You speak English?"

The Yakuza peered at him with a strained face, bugging his eyes out to see him through his shades. "English? Yeah."

Quint flicked his cigarette against the man's chest and threw him down the stairs by his collar. He rolled end over end, tried to throw his arms out to catch himself, twisted into a handstand, and fell with his collarbone against the edge of a stair. The man let out a choked scream and oozed to the alley below. Quint followed him down, then kicked him over to his back. He took the gun out of the gangster's jacket.

"You'll live. You got a radio on you?"

"Y..Yeah!!"

"Call for help."

Confusion replaced panic on the injured fellow's face. "Call for help?"

Quint stalked down the alley towards the automatic doors of The Sanitarium. He was sick of doing the right thing. "Tell that ninja b***h and her friends I've come to kill them all."

The doors, mocked up to resemble the doors of an emergency room, slid open on their tracks. They released the pulsing bass beat of house techno—the kind that sounds the same from two blocks away regardless of the song. He walked into a bizarre coat checking room, covered in industrial tile with another set of sliding doors ahead of him. The place looked like a converted

prison shower, but it was more of a place the bouncers used to relocate the comatose addicts who passed out in the club. Several zoned-out junkies splayed in the corners gaped at the overhead lights with blown pupils, sleeves rolled up to reveal abscessed heroin tracks. A drug pusher near the door saw that Quint was armed, threw his hands up and edged out the door behind him.

To his right was the window to the coat check, crewed by a trio of suited gunman who were just now receiving the news of his arrival. They looked up at the door, all three with their fingers stuck in their ears so they could better hear their earpiece radios. They reached for their weapons but Quint was already firing. His aim was still good, even though it had been years since he'd really had to fire one. Not since his last war, he reckoned. In a way, it felt good to be a part of a new one; things were much simpler tonight than they'd been in years.

The Yakuza men fell quickly; only one had even managed to free his gun from his jacket. Quint tossed his gun aside and collected the others, stuffing the third in the back of his pants. He also collected a clean earpiece from the one man he hadn't shot in the face. The radio was alive with voices asking what was happening and giving status reports. He never learned Japanese, but somehow he understood it. The same nervous chill racked his nerves every time he realized something like that. It made him think of the voices inside him, just when they'd started to quiet.

He didn't have much time. From the voices on the radio there were at least a dozen men farther inside and a single phone call would bring just as many in a few minutes. There wouldn't be any police until much, much after the fact.

He walked through the second set of doors into a much larger dance hall. Colored lights angled from high-wired electric rigs angled down onto a central floor where a dancing crowd undulated to the rhythm of the music. The floor was ringed with elevated platforms, on which stood glass cages, each containing a stripper writhing around an industrial shower head. Booths circled the hall, shadowy corners to get laid, get high, drink, or any combination of the three. Quint could see some booths occupied by makeshift hookahs fashioned from old oxygen tanks, where tweakers had their faces strapped by plastic masks and huffed massive amounts of pure O₂. Almost every booth had such tanks. Many others also had IV stands, hooked up to stoners freebasing God-knew-what straight into their veins.

Someone on the radio shouted that he had a clear shot. Quint squatted low, scanning the electric rigs through the sight of his gun. The lights on the dance floor shifted to blue, backlighting a sniper lying prone on the rig. Quint kept moving for cover, firing into the lights. He got lucky; the radio squawked in distortion as the sniper screamed. The crowd barely reacted to the sound of the gunshots; they could barely be heard over the pounding bass. But when the sniper fell twenty feet from the ceiling to crash in a heap amidst the crowd with half

of his jaw missing, the dance floor cleared as if a mine had gone off.

He was close to the bar now, a long stretch of stainless steel that dominated the east wall. He dove into a booth just as another gunman took a firing position behind the beer taps. Buzzing submachinegun fire shredded through the thin metal seats as if they were tin foil. Quint rolled to the floor, away from the burst fire. The panicked crowd headed for the only exit, and they only ran faster when they saw what remained of the coat check staff.

He tried to make a move but the gunman pinned him back down with another burst. Tiles shattered and sprayed in chalky triangular shards inches from his face. Quint could hear that backup was coming any second on the earpiece. He jumped the booth seat and came out firing at the bar with both guns. The gunman ducked behind cover, but Quint kept firing down through the flimsy metal. He heard the man cry out as he levered himself over the bar and saw that he'd perforated the man with at least eight rounds; the exit wounds were hideous sucking holes left behind by the hollowpoint rounds loaded in his .45s.

More shots came from the booths. Quint traded fire with them but didn't expect to hit anything at that range in the frenetic lighting. Suddenly the speakers cut to dead silence; and everyone instinctively dropped behind cover at the sudden change in conditions. For a moment, the only sound Quint could hear was the leaking of shattered liquor bottles and the scattered footfalls of people running. A bloody Scorpion submachinegun lay nearby, clutched in the dead man's hand. Quint took it and frisked him for magazines.

Silence now. They were waiting for help before flushing him out. He wasn't going anywhere. Quint slapped a new magazine into the Scorpion, a tight crack sounded through the room. He exhaled slowly. He caught a glimpse of his face in the stainless steel surface of the cabinets. It was blurry, but as he turned his attention it seemed to become clearer, as if in a mirror at the edge of his peripheral vision. It was not his own face, he thought; he saw dusky skin and hair coated with sweat and dirt. His face held the slack expression of a man long dead. Blood streamed in wide rivulets down his face from the top of his head, down into his eyes like tears.

He knew that he hadn't imagined it. Sometimes the voices within himself could speak through his waking vision. The Others would taunt him with such images, or make him confused with strange thoughts in his head. Sometimes he would look into a mirror and find for a long moment of panic that he didn't recognize his own face, or couldn't remember the name he'd chosen for the current thirty years. Once, he found that even his birth name seemed alien and wrong. They took great pleasure in tormenting him, or else they would have stopped long ago. But they had never shown him that face before. He didn't know who it was supposed to be. His own blurry visage replaced it when he looked again.

****We're coming in.****

And they'd come in shooting. Suppressing fire came again to cover their entrance, but by now they had no idea where he'd moved to. Quint stood just as the western doors opened. He swept the barrel of the Scorpion across the entranceway back and forth until nothing moved except a mess of tangled bodies and a spreading pool of blood. He turned his attention to the shooters in the booths. His shots struck the two oxygen tanks that served as fixtures for each table, and they erupted into fireballs. He exchanged his last magazine into the Scorpion and advanced on the slaughter, weapon raised to his shoulder. They were all dead. Quint was too good at what he did.

Beyond the façade of the dance club, the hallway beyond the doors took on a much different look than the hospital gimmick of The Sanitarium. The true wealth of the Dragons was only hinted at by the opulence of the furnishings. It resembled a mixture of modern office fixtures and authentic Edo-era design. Further inside, the place dropped all pretense of being a legitimate business and revealed itself as part dormitory, part training dojo for ninja and kunoichi. These rooms were lined with tatami mats, walled with translucent washi paper on wooden frames. None of the artwork or symbols on the weapons seemed to indicate that the Dragons fashioned themselves a particular historical clan, but Quint guessed that their usage of the ninja imagery was simply a convenience. It gave them power, pawns, anonymity, and maybe even a religious mystique among their followers. After all, a group of men and women who had transcended death must surely teach their ninpo secrets to their most favored agents.

Quint knew where to go; he felt their presence shortly after entering the building. They were waiting for him. The halls were abandoned, which Quint found puzzling. He thought he would have to kill his way every inch of ground the he crossed. An indistinct sound halted him. He paused to listen. Laughter? He tore aside the shoji door and entered a dining room. In the center stood a low table surrounded by kneeling cushions. The smell of tea and incense was rich in the air. Three of the seats were taken by the surviving Three Dragons, two men seated on either side and one woman at the head of the table. One spot was left open for him. The women stared at him under low eyelids, stirring a finger in her teacup with slow deliberation.

The Immortals were garbed in loose silk kimonos. The woman wore an elegant black silk dress patterned with an intricate silver snowflake design so closely wound together it resembled the workings of a spider with an eye for fashion. Her black hair was bundled up in an elaborate bun, held together with a silver pin. She was perhaps the only authentic Japanese there. The laughing one, Nizmar El Shanawi was a man Quint recognized from long ago, when the British occupied India. The other man was unknown to Quint, with very dark, nearly black skin. He wore an angry expression, almost as if Quint had just interrupted an argument between them.

"A gun, Dexter?" El Shanawi teased, "That's hardly fair, is it?"

Quint shot him about a dozen times. “Don’t tell me about fair. I should have made it my mission to wipe every last one of you a**h***s the night you killed Constance Dequenue.”

The other man snorted out a laugh, “The night you killed—” but Quint finished the sentence for him with a barrage of searing lead to his chest.

“The sheer ego of you guys is what annoys me the most, Kitsu Tomie.” Quint turned his weapon to the woman. She continued watching him with her level gaze, little droplets of her partners’ blood sprayed across her face. “Now that we’re finally alone together, we can talk.”

“Your disrespect in my house insults me,” she said.

“Did I leave my shoes on? Where are my manners?”

“Where indeed.”

“Fine,” Quint snapped, “You want to talk about insults, it really hurt my feelings when you didn’t come to take my head personally in Alaska. You sent mortals.”

“You would have sensed our arrival,” she shrugged. “You would have been ready, and you might even have won. Doubtful, but...”

“That doesn’t make any sense. You wouldn’t have gained anything if they’d killed me. The quickening—”

“We don’t care about your polluted soul or the taint of dishonor your quickening would have given us. All that matters is that you die.”

“Why? What did I do? Is it personal? What?”

Kitsu Tomie sighed, folding her hands in her lap. “You’ve hidden the truth from the rest of us. Hidden it well for a long time. But the one person you can’t hide it from is yourself. Don’t be a fool.”

“I’m this close to blowing your head off with this gun and finishing this game of yours once and for all,” shouted Quint, “if you don’t answer me!”

She pointed at him. “That scar on your hand. When did you get it?”

He faltered for a moment, looked at his hand and tried to remember. “I...it was a long time ago. An arrow wound. In Dunkirk, I think. I was—”

"And the scar along your throat?"

"I don't remember."

"The scar over your heart?"

"You gave me that, what the hell is the point?"

"Your scars. You have them. You keep getting them."

Quint lowered his gun. "So?"

"Look at me closely, Dexter Quint." Tomie stood, and turned in a circle so that Quint could see her body. She traced a slender finger across the side of her face, down the nape of her neck, and trailed it along her bosom. "You could check me all over, if you like, and you wouldn't find a single scar."

"Very cute. Get back."

"Tell me, Quint. Why is it that our wounds heal as if they'd never been inflicted, and yet your skin is marked with every last wound you've received for millennia? It's because you're special, Quint. Well," she amended, brushing her hair back, "perhaps 'special' isn't the word. It's because you are marked. You. You're fated to die."

"Marked how??"

"You can never win the Prize, Quint. You have to die before the game can end. And now you will."

Tomie's hand flashed out from her hair, throwing the silver hairpin that held her hair up. It sank into his chest, burning like it was coated in napalm. Quint grunted and staggered back. The kunoichi kicked the gun from his grasp, wheeled, and roundhouse kicked the pin deeper into his chest. He fell, fingers gripping at the pin but it was stuck firmly in his body.

"I called the others away because I wanted to kill you myself this time," she said. She unwound the small belt around her waist and pulled away its silk sheathing, revealing a strange weapon consisting of a long slender wire with a thin dagger tied to the end. "It's only a shame you didn't bring a real weapon with you."

"Long story." Quint reached to the back of his jeans and freed the gun he'd kept there. Tomie

lashed the wire-whip out, sending the dagger point through his forearm. She yanked the wire back and the blade was torn from his flesh. The gun dropped from his hand. A stiff kick to his sternum sent him crashing through the paper wall into another room, almost empty except for various cushions on the floor, perhaps used for meditation. He threw one of them in her direction to disrupt her weapon, but the wire sliced it in half as she swung, filling the air with feathers.

Quint rushed up to overbear her with strength, but she sidestepped his clumsy rush and drove the point of her elbow into the back of his neck. A kick to his kidneys sent him crashing bleary-eyed through the table. He coughed blood, crawling for the sword carried by one of the men he'd shot. His fingers brushed a black scabbard just as Tomie wound the narrow wire around his neck. It cut into his skin as she put a foot to the small of his back and pulled his body up with the weapon. He gagged silently, unable to make a sound or put his fingers under the wire to relieve the pressure. He thought he could feel blood vessels in his eyes exploding as panic gripped him.

She bent down to his ear. "And her name was not Constance. We know her name, and it was Marie. Goodbye."

Quint wrenched the hairpin from his chest with both hands and slammed it over his shoulder, squarely into her eye socket. She dropped the weapon, shrieking in horror. He gulped stinging lungfuls of air, crawling forward to grab the sword he'd found near El Shanawi.

With a berserk yell, Quint felt Tomie's weight drop down on his back. She gripped both ends of the wire in her hands and yanked with all of her strength, trying to slice his head off with it like a hunk of cheese. He reached back and pulled her down over his shoulder by the hair. The Dragon kunoichi kicked to free herself from his grasp, but Quint had unsheathed the katana enough to drive its edge down across her throat. She croaked an airy, hoarse curse, groping blindly for him. He watched her for a moment, gingerly removing the wire from his neck. She'd drawn herself up to her knees. He cut her head from her body before allowing himself to stop for breath.

"Goodbye, Kitsu-sama."

The lights flickered and failed as the power of the quickening was released from her body. Her corpse became cloaked in a shimmering ether, rising from the ground. The teacups began to boil, the blood on the floor steamed. Quint had to finish the others quickly before the entire place was consumed in a storm that would cause even more innocent death. He turned and saw the black-skinned Dragon had somehow moved to where he'd dropped his submachinegun. The man angled it, braced against the floor in his direction.

Shots rang out from the doorway. The man crumpled to the matted floor again, a half-dozen new bullets shredded through his body. Quint looked astounded at the shooter, a young lady who held the gun in trembling hands. Her hair was different this time, but still dyed a criminally garish color. She gave him an uneasy grin, shouting over the rising noise of the timbers groaning overhead.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this, Quint.”

Chapter Fifteen: When the Flood Waters Rise

Shinjuku District

Tokyo, Japan

November 3, 2004 – 1:25 AM

Sound and thoughts melded together with his inner voices, forming a smoky miasma that clouded his consciousness. He was dimly aware of his surroundings, but his senses were overloaded. All feeling came to his brain filtered through a tinny feedback noise, which Quint dreamily thought was strange—how could his eyes register a high-pitched tone? Tinnitus squelched out the other, much more important sounds that he knew he should try to focus on, but the Quickening left him sluggish and disoriented. For now, he saw the world through a long tunnel, feeling a little like a disinterested security guard watching his own life through a bad monochrome monitor on the fritz.

Someone was pulling on his arm rather painfully. He knew this because it was by far the most annoying sensation battling for priority in the complaint line in his brain. Unfortunately, there was only one window open at the moment and the clerk didn’t speak English. It took a number and shuffled to the back of the queue.

He heard a peculiar noise. It was a comparatively small, pleasant noise that reminded him of breakfast, like the gentle hiss of sizzling hash. He drew his focus to look at his shoulder. The noise again. And again. He looked up to see what was causing it, and a raindrop punched him violently in the cornea. He laughed. It was beginning to rain! He watched in wonder as raindrops evaporated into wisps of steam off his shoulders. Why were his shoulders that hot?

“Would you get in??” Hands clapped him behind his neck and pushed him down. He cracked his head on a wedge of fiberglass and got muscled into the backseat of a car. He howled angrily and sat upright; that didn’t help the waiting room in his head at all. The clerk said “screw it” in

Tagalog, put up a sign that said "NEXT WINDOW PLEASE" and went off to smoke. Did he know Tagalog?

"Jaysis Christ," remarked someone nearby, "Oi think that Quickening knocked out power on the 'ole street. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, you shoulda seen it from where I was standing," Kelli said as she swung into the driver's seat.

"Kelli?" Quint guessed. Nobody paid him any attention; he was too far behind in the conversation and neither of them was willing to bring him up to speed.

"How many?"

Kelli hesitated as she put the little Japanese car in gear. Quint craned his neck around to look out the window, but didn't see much. Instead of glass, the window was constructed of thick, streaky translucent plastic that Quint had only seen as the windows in American public transit. The car accelerated with a laughable whining sound—the engine must have been a two-cylinder, tops—and all he could see through the window was aura and shadow. This was wrong. He knew for a fact the Japanese made better cars than this. This thing was one step up from those Matchbox cars you pulled back across a smooth surface and released. He bet that if you put this car onto shag carpeting it would spin its wheels helplessly. He put it as eloquently as he could.

"This car is a complete sh**box!"

Kelli scowled back at him. "We're on a budget, okay?"

"Here," the old man next to Quint in the backseat tossed him something wrapped in crinkly white cellophane. "Have a Snack Cake."

He stared blearily at the half-flattened pastry package with kanji characters and said simply "Okay."

"What happened in there?" asked the old man, "How many dead?"

"All of them. All the eh, the Immortals at least. Wasn't hard to find him."

Quint latched onto that idea and spoke through a mouthful of cherries and bullet-resistant carbohydrates, "Hey how did you find me? And why? And who the f*** are you," he looked at the old man.

“Slow down mate, and put your sword down, eh? Me name’s Jack Donahl. Been watchin’ yeh for years now. An’ the reason I found yeh is because I knew you’d do the stupidest bloody thing possible instead of keepin’ a low profile like any smart man would.”

Quint was about to retort and was surprised to see that he did still indeed have a bloodied katana resting across his lap and pointed rather dangerously across Jack’s stomach. He wolfed down the rest of the Snack Cake, wrestled the window down, and threw the sword out onto the sidewalk.

“Wait—’

“What the hell are you doing?” Kelli exclaimed, “Now you don’t have a sword at all!”

“Katanas aren’t my style,” he muttered, but saw that that explanation didn’t satisfy either of them. “Literally not my style. I never trained with those things. I’d hurt myself sooner than anyone else with one. I’ll do all right with what I’ve got.”

“Thought you assumed the knowledge of every Immortal you kill.”

“Sort of. It doesn’t work like that. It’s...” Quint searched his thoughts for the right words but was also trying to battle a migraine that hadn’t left him for days. Finally he conceded, “Maybe I could use one, but it wouldn’t be...it wouldn’t be me. It would be someone else’s will behind the movements. Someone else’s voice.”

“What?” Donahl looked at him with interest.

“Their voices. I hear them.” Finally he met Donahl’s stare. “So what do you want?”

“I want to warn yeh. There’s a secret group of people around the world who dedicate their lives to watching and recordin’ the activities of Immortals through history. They’ve put out the word somehow that killing you will trigger The Gathering.”

“That’s what Kitsu Tomie said, that I was fated to die. The Gathering? I’ve heard rumors of that for so long I scarcely believed it could happen. Why do they think that? Why me?”

Donahl shrugged. “They think you’re special somehow. Marked, maybe. It’s got somethin’ to do with your past. I thought I had complete access to your file. Oi mean, records are sketchy in some places but we know you returned to Rome after your execution—”

“How far back do these records go?”

"All the way. The quality up until recently was crap, mostly hasty notes in journals. It's only in the last decade or so that the Watchers have really started to digitize all their information. Runnin' it all through scanners and OCR equipment. Now we've got video, phone logs, everythin'. Hell, for the last two years I been trackin' your movements on a map through a GPS device. Up until you lost it. The only reason I found yeh is because I knew yeh'd finally go after the Dragons. Especially after--"

"And just who decided my life was any of your f***ing business, huh?"

"You're the most powerful beings on the planet. Everything yeh do has historical relevance that echoes down through the centuries. It's the whole world's business if one of you wins the Prize. And besides that, you ought to be thanking us for what we do for you."

"Thanking you."

"Yeah. Back in the Dark Ages I bet it was a piece o' 😊:):) loppin' each other's heads off, happy as ya please. But it's the 21st century, mate. The age a-camera phones and people who can post pictures of your silly ass explodin' a city block on their blog in about two seconds flat. We've got contacts in the press, the police, and the Internet whose mission is to suppress that sh**e, and keep you free to do your bloody work. I was the sorry bastard who had to clean up all the headless corpses yeh leave in your wake."

"Guys," Kelli raised a hand from the steering wheel, "Just figure this thing out, okay?"

Donahl sighed. "The point is, there's a portion of your file that was expurgated and kept classified even from me. Codenamed Heimdall. Supposedly it explains everything, but when we copied it, the whole thing was encrypted all to hell. Since Oi pistolwhipped one of the only people around who knows the key, I figure we're rightly f***ed. Then I figured I'd just ask you."

Quint blinked between Kelli and Jack. "Ask me what? Why they think killing me is going to cause The Gathering? I don't know."

"Come on, Quint," Jack pressed, "You must have some idea."

"Like what?" he shouted, "I've done terrible things, it's true. But I can't think of anything that...that would drive everyone rabid with a desire to kill me and disregard every rule of honor we keep. I can't think of anything that terrible."

'Oh yes you can.'

'And now it's caught up with you, hasn't it.'

'We remember. Oh yes.'

"Quint?"

Quint felt feverish. He thought he saw a face in the window again. Dark skin, dark hair, dark blood. His head hurt. He pressed his hands against his temples. He remembered dust, blood, and the setting sun. But the memory fled from his grasp like a feather in the wind. "Kelli, drive us to the airport. We need to go to London."

Kelli glanced over, "I thought we were going to go hide out."

"We still might," Donahl mused, "But London might work out too. I have some mates who might help with that encryption in British Intelligence."

Quint gave him a look, "You do?"

"Yeah. Wasnae t'always a Watcher, y'know. What do you remember?"

"I don't know," he admitted, his voice dreamy. "I have a cache there, in a vault. Weapons, money, antiques. In case things ever got rough or if I wanted to settle down again. Just now, when I closed my eyes, I saw someplace. But I've never been there. I would remember. Why can't I remember?"

'But you can.'

'You don't want to.'

'We remember. Shall we tell you?'

'But we can't, can we.'

'Oh no, we can't.'

'Some corpses can never be buried deeply enough.'

'Some memories can never be buried deeply enough.'

'When the flood waters rise, up, up they come...'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Figment

Pelusium, Egypt

September 30, 48 BC

Midday

In the moments just before dreaming, or sometimes after a nightmare, Quintus Artorius Dexion

would experience the sensation of falling. It was as if the ground crumbled under his body. His guts would leap up against his spine, and his nerves would scream electric. A panic would rise in his body for a brief second, until he opened his eyes and realized he was safe. These moments had only started to come after Dexion had left his wife in Rome—gone to join the legion and become a citizen of the Republic.

His sleeping calm was snatched away, and he felt himself drop down. Only this time, Dexion did not awaken. His arms would not move, nor his eyes open. He could not hope to cling to the safety of his bedroll, his mouth would not scream. His innards trembled as he fell, and frantic, Dexion scrambled inside the confines of his comatose body for strength.

Then, even worse than falling, he hit the bottom. His heart exploded within his chest, pounding a defiant pulse that burned his cold veins. His muscles clenched from his stomach, spreading outward to his fingertips, pulling back against his bones so hard that he could hear them creak in his own ears like a tree falling. His back arched upwards, involuntarily sucking in musty, fetid air through his mouth so hard his throat was stripped raw. He flung his hands up to his neck. He could still see the hate in the eyes of Gaius Julius Caesar, feel his choking fingers. Instinctively he scrabbled backwards to get his back against a wall, but in his haste he clumsily struck his head against it. He pulled his legs up to his chest and pinned himself to the wall, his frenzied breaths still labored and painful.

A new wave of nausea racked his body. His skin prickled and his fever was quashed like he was doused with a bucket of icy water. Quintus found himself staring up at a man seated across the room from him on a small table. The room was windowless, lit only by the daylight seeping in from under the door and a small oil lantern on the table. Sawdust was thick in the air, with heavy chips littering the floor so deeply that the stone beneath it could not be seen. The room smelled of old blood and feces. It was with shock that Quintus realized the smell was himself; he'd lost control of his bowels and he'd been stripped naked. Now he was sheathed in his own filth and sweat. He was still uncertain whether or not any of this was reality or the mad dreams of a mind clinging to death.

"The sensation you are feeling is the Quickening," said the man. He leaned closer, and Quintus saw that he was Roman, dressed in the striped toga of a senator of Rome. He looked down at Dexion with a calming turn to his lips, and tossed him some loose rags.

"Do not be afraid. Here, clean yourself." The man pushed a pitcher across the floor to Dexion with his foot, a gentle splash of water spilled over the edge when it stopped. "You'll have a better opportunity to bathe later."

"I thought I was dead," Dexion cried out, louder than he'd intended. He tried to moderate his tone and find the right questions to ask. Instead he could only stammer, "I thought—"

"Dead, yes," the man nodded. But he hopped from the table and squatted down near Dexion. "But you are not of a mind to hear everything yet; it will only upset you. Let us simply say for now that you are alive. My name is Gaius Cassius Longinus."

"I...Quintus Artorius Dexion. You..."

"I am the tribune of the Plebs. Or I was. I'm not sure what will become of me now."

"The others spoke highly of you, but I remember only a little," Dexion said slowly. He gathered up the rags and stood on shaky legs. "I heard that you commanded the fleet of Pompey Magnus."

"Yes I did. The fleet was smashed and I was overtaken, and made to surrender without condition." Cassius turned away from Dexion and went to collect a small bundle of clothes on the table as Quintus cleaned himself. Cassius laughed quietly, "I'm harmless enough that I'm allowed to wander freely, so long as I take up arms against Caesar no longer. You are the man executed for the murder of Pompey Magnus?"

Dexion could only lower his head in shame.

"I'm unsure how to feel about you," Cassius admitted. He smoothed the clothes in his hands. "But I'll not judge you today. We will have to speak of it later, to be sure."

"What is to become of me? Am I to be executed?"

Cassius looked down at him for a long time before answering. "You have been executed already, Dexion. You are alive, but Caesar—everyone—thinks you are dead. You have been granted life anew by divine purpose. You are destined for great things, it seems. In that regard, you and I are the same. We are brothers."

Dexion took the clothes from his countryman. They were dun-colored and baggy, little more than plebian castoffs of heavy wool. His skin continued to prickle in the presence of the other Roman, as if he were a wolf who had caught the scent of a rival predator. "So I'm to live? But how do you know this? How do you come to be here at this moment?"

Cassius sighed and reached out to put a hand on Dexion's shoulder. "You must trust me now. We have nothing but time ahead of us, but if we're found here...Get dressed, Dexion. Please. I promise you'll have your answers."

"Where will we go?"

“We’re bound for Rome within the week. No doubt you can accompany me under the guise of a freeman or maybe even one of my cousins.” Cassius smirked a little, “I can barely keep all my distant relations straight. Who’s to challenge my word on the matter?”

Cassius Longinus turned for the door. Dexion took his arm. “And your price? For your answers? Your word? And your protection, I assume.”

The tribune nodded, his expression one of understanding and even pride. “Good. You’ll do well, I think. As for my price, it’s your protection that I need.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Follow me. For now, I’ll make you this bargain: Once we’re asea, I’ll answer any questions you have. And you’re free to go anytime you like. And in return, all you have to do is listen to something very important I have to ask you. Just listen, nothing more.”

“Very well,” Dexion agreed, “What is it?”

“Not now.” Cassius Longinus opened the door and looked in both directions. Sunlight flooded the room so heavily that Dexion was forced to shield his eyes. “Follow me to the docks at a distance,” he said as he left the room, “I’ll see that you’re fed and clothed properly. For now, you shall pose simply as a man in my service. Agreed?”

“Yes.” Dexion waited for a short time after the man had left and contemplated his options. He could simply leave, he supposed, disappear anywhere he wanted. He wondered if the answers that Cassius promised would bring him any peace. Indeed, he doubted it very much.

He decided that Cassius could not be trusted. He could never return home; it would not be safe for his wife. She never saw him again.

He was a traitor to his country. He never returned to Rome. He never rejoined the legion. He went north, into Gaul and eventually into Germania. He lived in Britannia for many years as a simple fisherman.

Chapter Seventeen: Old Spies

Rúla Búla Irish Pub & Restaurant
London, England

November 6, 2004 – 12:05 PM

“And so the prodigal son returns.”

Jack Donahl turned at the sound of the voice and raised a pint to his guest as he sat across the table from him. The weather outside was so vengefully cold that both men were wearing several layers of wool, even inside the pub. The man groaned to cover the sound of his creaking knees as he sank into the chair. He breathed through his mouth because the crud in his nose had frozen up three seconds out the front door. Donahl was surprised at first that the man had dressed down for the occasion, but it was good tradecraft. It made Donahl feel a little more secure that he hadn't been arrested already, but with spooks they might be trying to work him for information before they nab him.

“I started without yeh,” Donahl says, taking a sip of his drink. “Been a while since I've had a proper drink. Hope yeh don't mind.” Donahl motioned to the barkeep for another round.

“You're looking well, Jack.”

“Bollocks.”

“All right, you look terrible. Dare I say, you look pickled. Living rough, are we?” The man excused himself for a moment and shamelessly cleared his nose on his handkerchief.

“Jet lag. Been doing a lot of traveling.” Donahl finished off his glass, setting it down beside a laptop computer. It was closed, and it took up much of the available space on the table. Donahl had relocated the small bowl of peanuts to his lap, where he munched on them contentedly.

“How frightened should I be that you're here after all these years asking for a favor?”

“Frightened? Not at all, Harry. I just want to talk.”

Harry Whitehall sighed. He crossed his arms over his barrel chest, looking at Donahl with a strained expression on his face. It was as emotional as Harry ever got, who by necessity was able to mask the strongest emotion. He was as carefully unremarkable as an MI-5 spook could ever hope to be: clothes that looked like they'd been in his wardrobe for years, a scratched wristwatch, the unimaginative haircut of a lifelong chartered accountant. “You want a lot more than that, Jack. I don't know why you came back, but you should have stayed where you were. I have every reason to bring you in.”

“Then why don't you?”

Whitehall stared at him for a long time, until his reverie was broken by the arrival of the drinks Donahl had ordered. Finally, he took a sip of the deep oaken-colored beer. It seemed to relax him. He leaned back in the chair. "Curiosity. Why are you here?"

"You don't really want to know that."

"Yes, you know I really do."

"I'm here to help a friend. I wouldn't be here if there was any other way. I hope yeh believe that."

The spook's face hardened, "That always was your problem, Jack. Sentimentality. You never could put your loyalties in order."

"They've always been in order. I just realized that some things come before queen and country. Family. Friends."

"I guess we weren't family enough for you," Harry asked dismissively.

"I made my choice."

Whitehall's fist crashed down on the table, nearly upsetting the drinks. He tried to keep his tone quiet, hissing the words through clenched teeth. "You chose your f***ing mick bomber buddies over two agents of the service. Every favor you might have had burned up with their bodies in Belfast."

"I tried to stop it. Don't you think I tried?" Donahl leaned forward as well, whispering insistently in an attempt not to cause a scene. "They didn't listen to me. If I'd done any more I'd have been compromised and you would have never—"

"Don't feed me that line of sh**. You used to be a good agent until something changed you. I wish to God I knew what, but instead of coming home you dropped off the grid completely. Do you have any idea how that looked? We didn't know if you'd snapped, if you'd gone rogue, or...or whatever. You stayed with them, Jack. I don't say it lightly, but you provided aid and comfort to our enemies. You can say whatever you want about honor and loyalty, but you've still got a lot to be held accountable for."

Donahl slumped, looking into his glass for a long moment. "Then maybe we can both get what we want."

"What do you mean?"

Donahl spun the laptop around and pushed it towards Whitehall. "The hard drive on this computer contains a number of archived files, most of them heavily encrypted. I'm interested in one in particular, name o' Codename Heimdall. I need you to open that file for me."

"What's in it?"

"Don't know. Historical records, I suspect. Now I won't lie to yeh, I'm guessin' the encryption on those files—on that file in particular—could be out of your league."

"Out of our league," Whitehall scoffed, "I'm bloody MI-5, not some cybercafé clerk."

"The people this file belongs to," Donahl insisted, "place a very high value on their information security."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you that. But I won't be surprised if you come up empty. All I'm asking is that you try. Come here tomorrow, same time with my computer. No copies. No one else sees that information."

"And where in all of this do I benefit? What could you possibly offer me?"

Donahl stood up from the table, pulling on his cap. He looked to the door, to the pedestrians walking stiffly outside and started to prepare himself for the cold. "Yeh ask what changed me, and all I can say is that I lost my faith. I spent twenty years in Ireland. Fightin' the good fight, whatever yeh may think of me. I got married. Became a widower. Been a friend and brother to me mates. Felt more at home there than I ever have anywhere else. And I'm responsible for the deaths of your agents and many more besides, I've nae doubt of that. You do this for me, Harry, and I'll confess to all of it. I'll turn meself in. Ye've my word on that, if that ever meant anything to yeh."

Donahl set the bowl of peanuts on top of the computer and left, throwing a wave to the barkeep as he stepped out the door. It was then that Harry Whitehall came to a sudden realization.

"That Irish bastard just stuck me with the check again."

Chapter Eighteen: Незнакомец

Near Uvs Nuur Lake, Siberia

January 14, 1874

Filip Petkin scowled at the stranger from his vantage point behind the wet bar. The man had seated himself in the corner of the room with his back facing the hearth and demanded another bottle of vodka, though it sat unopened on the table next to his first. Filip suspected the stranger was destitute, filthy and half-frozen as he was. Ice still clung to his stringy brown beard. Likewise, the man's hair was filthy, a grimy knotted mop of hair unkept and untended for what seemed like a year or more. He probably had no money to pay, and judging from the melancholy slouch to his shoulders, didn't much care what the barkeep did about it.

Petkin had seen enough lost souls waste away in his common room to recognize the hollow, ragged determination chiseled into his eyes. They were sunken into his skull, surrounded by dark rings. His gaunt face and haunted stare spoke of a man who was already dead inside, he was only drinking so that his body would die along with his soul. His yellowed eyes welcomed Hell, because the devil could do no worse to him, whatever had happened to him in life.

Filip watched him for a time, wondering if he needed the stout length of wood that he kept under the bar. He drank with a slow, deliberate pace, lost deep in his own thoughts. The man was out of shape, but still looked big enough to be dangerous if angered. But he doubted that much could break him out of his melancholy. Filip suspected that he would simply leave if he asked.

The stranger seemed to sense Filip's gaze and looked at him through his downcast hair. The fire snapped, making the innkeep jump under the stranger's intense stare. Petkin looked embarrassed and stepped from around the bar. His footsteps thudded hollow over the old wooden floor planks, the nails within creaking so loudly that Petkin tried to drag his feet in order to stay quiet. It felt wrong to interrupt the beautiful, irregular crackling from the hearth's flame.

"I am sorry," Petkin said, motioning to Anya, the serving girl. She was headed up the narrow stair with quilts that his wife had sewn. "She should have told you that—"

"I have money," the stranger said simply. He scattered some coins on the table, uncaring of how much it amounted to. Filip saw that it was more than enough, but busied himself collecting only what was due. The man picked up the second bottle and stuffed it into a knapsack that he kept beside the hearth. He seemed to have already forgotten that he and Filip had spoken, and looked surprised that the barkeep was still standing there, looking at him when he'd finished closing the bag.

"I am sorry," Filip repeated. "It's rare that we have strangers to our village. Would you care for something to eat?"

"I don't need to eat." Something struck the stranger as being miserably funny about what he'd just said.

He set his bottle down and whimpered out a weak, desperate laugh that was more sorrow than mirth. His eyes glazed over with tears, and Filip's heart ached with pity for the man. But he knew nothing of the stranger and had no idea how he could help.

"Are you all right?"

"Sit with me a moment. Will you do that?" The barkeep did this; the inn would not be busy for hours yet. The man tipped the end of his bottle and offered Filip something to drink. He surprised himself by grasping the bottle and pouring himself a glass.

Filip saw old scars crossing the stranger's hands. They were rough and strong: the hands of a laborer, perhaps. Now that he was closer, Petkin saw something in the stranger's face that unsettled him, though he couldn't put a finger on it. An aged burden carried on the young man's shoulders, reflected in his eyes. Time seemed to wrack his spirit terribly, making him seem somehow ancient within. Filip's mother would have described him as an "old soul" were he a child. It made him uneasy to see this quality in a grown man.

"I'm looking for a man," the stranger said at last. His voice was strained and creaky with disuse, though he sounded like he'd asked this question a thousand times before and didn't expect a satisfactory answer. "He is smaller than me, but strong. He has long black hair and a beard. Perhaps a rich man. He's fond of poetry."

Filip knew many men with beards, but nobody wealthy or who read much of anything. "I don't know. Do you know his name?"

"Oh yes, but perhaps I think you would not." Filip looked at the stranger queerly. He sighed, "I knew him as Myrddin, but his birth name is Lailoken. He hails from the west, from England. When we left there together he took the name Gregory and—"

"Wait, yes...this man sounds strange, but I have heard of such a man." Petkin set his glass down and stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Although I would not put much hope in my word. He could be anybody."

"Tell me!"

"I know of a man who lives in a village called Pokrovskoye. An old man, but looks like you said. I remember him because he passed through here at one time, claiming to be a monk, but he looked like no monk I'd ever seen. Sat in that very chair, in fact. We all thought he was mad from the way he spoke of miracles and angels, and magic. He said his name was Grigori, but that's all I remember."

The stranger stood, his chair kicked to the side with the sudden motion. He gathered his belongings and scattered some more coins on the table. He looked hopeful, and Filip thought that perhaps this stranger was mad, too. He seemed to be in many places at once, as if he were looking into the past while walking in the present. A man lost in his own memories. Drowning.

“Please,” he said, “Tell me how to find this village. I’ll pay you.”

Filip’s asked only the stranger’s name as his price. Odd, he thought. For an American, Arthur Quint spoke remarkably good Russian.

Chapter Nineteen: Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water

Kensal Green Cemetery

London, England

November 8, 2004 – 2:11 AM

“Shouldn’t we have shovels for this?”

Quint put a hand on Kelli’s shoulder to draw her attention and held a finger to his lips. Sound carried easily in the early morning air, and while holy ground had been proven to be no bar to an attack by other Immortals, Quint’s real fear at the moment was the night watchman. He doubted there was one, but he didn’t feel like meeting one nonetheless. Together, he and Kelli vaulted the low stone wall that marked the boundaries of the old English burial grounds.

Frost clung to the pitted stones of the century-old grave markers, giving them a dimly glowing, ethereal quality in the waxing moonlight. It was enough to see by—barely—which was good because Quint had forbade Kelli to use the bulky security guard-style aluminum alloy flashlight she’d brought all the way from the trunk of her car in Bellingham. She was very proud of it, insisting that when loaded with a half-dozen D-cell batteries it would be a worthy match for any “chop-socky” sword Quint’s enemies might bring. She’d had to leave her gun behind before flying for Great Britain, something she’d been loathe to do considering their situation. Along with the gun went much of her peace of mind, and so the flashlight had supplanted it as her security blanket.

Kelli was dressed in an ugly mix of clashing colors, from clothes both old and new. Quint had spent all of yesterday in London by himself, leaving Kelli to ‘hold down the fort’ while the boys did their Immortal-business. They’d learned how much of a domestic goddess she was when they’d returned to discover she’d only ordered take-out for herself, leaving for them a pile of napkins and a couple of bags of pretzels from the hotel vending machine. Kelli thought that revenge must have been a strong motivating factor in Quint waking her at midnight. She’d been asleep for an hour and awoke to the sound of her toilet flushing and that damned Immortal demanding that she get dressed.

She dressed in the dark, throwing on the nearest articles of clothing at hand in the furious, shouting delirium of the unjustly awakened. When Quint emerged from the bathroom, mouth clamped around her toothbrush, she was wearing different socks, her pants were inside-out, and she was just putting a

bra on over her shirt. It made her look irresistibly cute, and Quint had told her so between bouts of toothpaste-spraying laughter. She'd finished dressing in the car, after angrily telling Quint to go f*** himself and demanded her own room in the future. This is what having older brothers must be like, she thought.

"Shovels? No. I don't think so."

"I wish you'd tell me what we're doing here," Kelli hissed, her breath steaming from her nose. The air was shockingly cold, and despite her best efforts Quint could hear her back teeth rattling together.

"Why I gotta be here at the ass-crack of the morning..."

"Because I need you here," Quint said. "I'm not entirely sure what I'm looking for. I feel—" but he stopped himself short. He didn't like speaking of the Others, the voices that prodded him onward into this misty graveyard.

"You feel what?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. But I feel like I should. The voices—The voices, they know. It's as if I've forgotten something, but they remember. Something prevents them from telling me. It feels like a word on the tip of my tongue, but always out of reach. Does that make sense?"

They'd stopped walking. Kelli lounged, hands behind her back against a leaning stone Catholic cross and quirked her eyebrows, giving him a comforting smile. "Not much has, lately. But I think I understand as much as we mere mortals can. I just don't see how I can possibly help."

"You have a fresh perspective. I don't know if I can trust my own anymore. And I think you have a right to know what's going on. And—" Quint looked away, his eyes tearing up a little, "This isn't easy for me to admit but... I need someone to help carry all my stuff back to the car."

Kelli swung the flashlight at his face and stalked after her chuckling companion. "Oh bullsh**. That's classic avoidance, you know. The sad thing is I'm the closest thing to a friend you got and you know it."

"You got me. This was all part of my evil plan to lure you here for a romantic tryst in a cemetery in below-freezing temperatures."

"What is it they say about real friends helping you rob graves?"

"Move bodies. And it's not technically grave-robbing if the grave belongs to me. Look—" Quint pointed to a high structure about thirty yards away, near a small stand of naked trees. It was a tomb of dirty, overgrown stone, surrounded by large angelic statues facing inward like heavenly sentinels. There were eight in all, of regal, knightly figures with swept-back wings, brandishing swords to the sky at one focal point above the center of the tomb. They too had weathered the last century badly, probably a victim of the erosive elements and vandals. The tomb itself was round, unusual considering so many other structures were squat, boxy affairs with strong Gothic-style accoutrements. In fact, this tomb looked

rather like a place for visitors to sit instead of a resting place for the dearly departed, or perhaps a fountain. They walked there together.

"It belongs to you?"

"It belongs to the late Arthur Quint," he replied. "Poor man died of pneumonia and left a sizable estate to his bereaved son, Julius."

"Hell of a way to go."

"I thought so."

Quint threw his small knapsack over the high edge of the circular tomb and pulled himself up smoothly. He offered his hand down to help. Kelli gave him a withering look, but took his hand and clambered atop the tomb. Quint shook his head and turned to root around in his pack. "What's the problem?"

Kelli hesitated. "How long have you been alone?"

Quint withdrew a pair of metal items from his pack. One was a black crowbar, and the other looked like a heavy iron key. "It'll take me a little while to open the sepulcher. It's locked, but it's also sealed over so I'll have to do some hammering. Hand me that rag."

"Don't do that," Kelli insisted, "Don't you f***ing do that. All your life you've been doing that, I bet."

"Doing what?"

"Keeping everyone at a distance. Answer my question, Quint. How long?"

Quint wouldn't look at her. Instead he wrapped the end of the crowbar in the rag and took out a large mallet from the pack. "A long time."

"Why?"

"It's safer that way."

"Safer for you, maybe."

Quint stopped what he was doing and glanced angrily up at her. "Kelli, I like you, but right now you don't know what the f*** you're talking about."

"Oh, right. And I guess I never will, unless Jack decides he wants to tell me what he knows from researching you. But that's not the same, is it? It's all between you and the voices in your head."

"If I didn't want you to know anything, I wouldn't have brought you here, would I?"

"You don't know what you want." Kelli took her ski cap off and sat cross-legged. "You been without friends for so long you made some up, and even they don't like you that much. That's why you dragged me here. You're desperate for some human contact but you don't know what to do when you've got it. The only way you can make friends anymore is by accident."

Quint started striking at the stone in the distance. Kelli couldn't see what he was doing in the poor light, but she could hear the low thumping of the dampened makeshift chisel and the rough sound of chipping stone. "You followed me, kid. I wish to God you were anywhere else, but I realized there wasn't any point in trying to leave you behind because you'd have followed after me anyway like some schoolgirl with a crush."

Kelli recoiled, looking stunned. "A crush?"

"You heard me."

"Listen, you egocentric prick—"

Quint threw the crowbar down so fiercely it rang off the stone like a clock chime. "No, you listen. I'm tired. I'm so god damn tired that every day I wake up is another day earned with blood. And I don't deserve it. My wife didn't deserve to hear that her husband was a traitor to the republic. My child didn't deserve to grow up with my shame looming over his head—a child, by the way, I will never know for sure was ever truly mine because Immortals can't father children. The people who died fighting with me, the people who died fighting for me, they didn't deserve that, either. They died thinking that the world is better off with me in it, and even I don't believe that anymore. All I do is kill, and make misery for others."

"And if you're right, if what Jack says is right," Quint threw down his hammer, "then this stupid game will never end as long as I still live. How pointless does that make my existence, then? All I can do anymore is to stay away from other people's lives because everything I touch, I break. So don't tell me I need to let people into my life, because I don't. You don't deserve that."

Kelli was silent for a long time while Quint resumed his work on the sepulcher. It began to rain, as the weather in England was oft wont to do, and she huddled miserably there, watching him as the rain escalated. She wondered if it was part of Quint's curse, if bad weather followed him to match his mood. Or perhaps his fate. Soon they were both shivering and soaked. Kelli stuffed her trembling hands into her pockets and spoke through chattering teeth. "Then why did you bring me here?"

"To give you what you said you wanted." He took up the heavy iron key and positioned it over the stone. Presently it sank halfway into the tomb. Quint grasped the end with both hands and twisted the key. A heavy mechanism turned within, as if many tumblers fell into line and a great weight shifted aside. Kelli heard the stone hatch he was working on fell away and crash hollowly inside the tomb.

Quint extended his hand. "I'll lower you in. You'll see."

Kelli squirmed down over the edge and peered down into the heavy shadows within the tomb, and could not see the floor beneath. Quint took her hand and lowered her down until her feet touched hard rock, and she let go. She used her flashlight to pierce the darkness around her, and saw that all around here were low shapes, all covered with coarse, heavy cloth to keep the dust away. The dust was thick, and plumed up twin twin clouds around her feet. Rain fell straight down into the square hatchway above, the first moisture the chamber had seen in decades.

Kelli walked slowly out of the rain, so as not to raise too much of the dust in the air, and knelt beside the nearest object. She pulled aside the cover, covering her mouth and turning away from the inevitable cloud of particulates that came off the burlap cloth. Beneath it sat a wooden trunk, banded with black iron vertebrae. It was long, and Kelli almost mistook it for a casket at first. It was unlocked, but held shut with a pair of thick bolts bracing it shut. Using the end of her flashlight, she punched out the bolts. Quint landed heavily behind her.

"Kelli?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to take what I need from here and leave you. Do you understand?"

"What?"

"It doesn't matter why the other Immortals want me dead so badly. Maybe it was just a matter of time before holy ground stopped being a safe haven. At first I thought things were different, but now I realize that nothing's really changed. Either I survive this or I won't. But let's be honest, it's just a matter of time before they wear me down."

"Don't say that, Quint." Kelli pointed to the chest. "You can't give up now. You've been led here for a reason. You just need to remember what was so important here."

"Maybe," he conceded, "But regardless, I'm leaving you both behind tonight. You can't be near me when they come. And they will. I brought you here to tell you that all this is yours. The money, everything."

"Quint—"

"The minister at the church where you met me has power of attorney over my estate. I sent him a letter. He'll handle everything, if he's still alive. If not, well I'm sure you're smart enough to live well on what's here. If you play your cards right, you might even be able to get that interview with Jane Pauley."

Quint brought out his own flashlight and walked away from her to investigate another part of the room. Kelli stared after him, realizing that even if she refused his offer, he was abandoning this place, abandoning her, and had made it clear he would never return.

"You're not even going to try and hide anymore, are you?" Kelli asked with horror. "You want them to find you now."

"Like I said," Quint said quietly from the darkness, "I'm tired."

"You're going out there to die."

"I'm going out there to face my death like a man. It's time I stopped running. Time I paid for my sins."

Kelli scrubbed at her eyes, telling herself that the tears she felt were because of the dust. She opened the trunk and found that inside was yellowed, oily flakes of rotten cloth. atop more bundles wrapped heavily in cloth that had fared the ravages of time little better. At her touch, most of the wrappings disintegrated or pulled apart into frayed, dry strands like gauze. She counted a half-dozen small bundles, but she saw another that made her recoil momentarily.

Blood. At one end of the trunk lay a pair of objects, their cloth wrappings both soaked through with brown, dried blood. One was long, nearly six feet in length, and she reached down to pull it out.

"Kelli, get over here." Quint said. She'd heard that tone from him once before, when the Frenchman, Rousseau had come for him at her dorm room.

"Quint? I think I—"

Kelli saw more blood inside the trunk, but this blood was fresh. New. She saw more, saw it falling on one place. She reached out to touch it, and saw that her hands were covered in it. She tried to call out for Quint, but found that she had no voice with which to speak. Quint grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her away from the trunk, so that she was lying on the dusty ground. He looked frightened, and she saw that he was calling her name, but all she could hear was a distant low crashing in her ears, like the ocean. She felt warmth in her breast, and the rain felt surprisingly good, cool against her skin. It fell through the hatchway above her, and Kelli saw that it was no longer nighttime outside, but there was a radiant, heavenly light.

"Here lies one whose name was writ in water," Quint heard from the hatch. The man who quoted Keats called down to him, the barrel of his gun still steaming in the chill rain. "It's written on your tomb, here: this line by John Keats. A fitting tribute to a man such as you, whose name is as inconstant as the ocean waves. When I first saw it, I developed a love for the man's writing. Truly a poet after my own soul. Oh, dry your eyes, Quintus. No doubt this is hardly the first mortal pet you've watched die, nor is she fated to be one of us. You can tell that as well as I."

Quint touched Kelli's face, watching the life bleed from her body. She still clutched one of his old trinkets to her breast, over the gunshot wound that had just destroyed her heart. She looked peaceful, as if what she saw above her was not her murderer, but a long-missed parent. Her eyes tried to locate

him as he called her name, but she couldn't focus.

"Why..." Quint seethed.

"You gave her the treasures within this tomb," Keats said. "And she is certainly not your rightful heir."

Quint spun around, grabbing up the ancient Roman blades that he'd uncovered. He howled up at the gloating old man in rimmed glasses over him. "Who are you?"

"I'm hardly surprised that you don't remember," he replied, "But I had hoped that you would. How many wars have we fought together? I was ever your trusted friend. I helped you weather the millennia. Such counsel we shared; I thought some vestige might remain after what I'd done."

"I'll kill you, you hear me? I'll kill you!"

"You're welcome to try, but first, I think you'd better bring up your son's inheritance. It's time you remembered what you asked me—what you begged me—to help you forget."

Keats withdrew a small crystalline pendant from his pocket, and dangled it beneath the threshold of the hatch. The pendant hung there, suspended by a slender golden chain. It cast a prismatic light, refracting brilliant colors from Kelli's discarded flashlight.

"Watch carefully, Quintus, and believe. Open your mind."

"What the hell is this?" Quint shouted.

Keats laughed. And suddenly Quint recognized the man. He no longer wore his long beard. His hair was short and neat. He wore glasses. But he would know that mad laugh anywhere. Myrddin. Lailoken. Or the last time Quint had spoken with him, he had taken the name of Grigori. Rasputin saw the recognition dawn on his face and laughed again, swinging the pendant in a gentle arc from side to side. "Just what I told you the first time, Quintus: it's a kind of magic."

Chapter Twenty: Святейший Человек

Pokrovskoye, Siberia

January 21, 1874

"It is an abomination that you ask of me. It defies God's will. Pain is what defines us. What shapes us. It is what makes you strong. Arthur—" Myrddin reached over and touched Quint's arm, a gesture that made him jump slightly. He felt a chill pass through his arm and resisted the instinct to pull away. Myrddin was trying to help him.

The cold was such that he thought Myrddin must be mad for demanding that they speak while taking a walk outside instead of the boarding house Quint had found him in. But then, Myrddin had long been mad ever since Quint had found him, naked and screaming prayers to the moon in Caledonian Forest. He was raving, throwing himself headlong into trees, and clawing at his own flesh with jagged fingernails in an attempt to end his own life, and giving glory to God at the marvel that he could not die. He called himself Lailoken in those days, and claimed to be a holy man, a healer, and a man blessed by God.

Quint had recognized Myrddin almost instantly. He still had the same untamed muddy bird's nest of hair, full of mange and grease accumulated from weeks without bathing. His beard was stringy and split with negligence, clumped together with filth and frost. He looked exactly the same as when they'd parted ways, only Myrddin now wore modern woolen clothes under his furs. His head was covered with a squat blue hat of felt or dense wool that covered his ears. It was almost conical in shape, something Quint found a queer irony in considering who Myrddin had always claimed to be.

A rush of wind swept in from the north, carrying a chill that cut through their woolens like a razor. It took his breath. Quint had to close his eyes against the brutal freezing burn that the Siberian air brought with it. Myrddin seemed not to be affected by it; his mind was such that ignored the temporary discomfort of his corporeal form, and being immortal, to him everything was temporary. Quint knew that he could not truly freeze, any more than he would die of thirst in the desert, but he still felt these sensations acutely. Myrddin had always been an ascetic sort, wearing robes of coarse hair that chafed him terribly.

He did it at the urging of no religious or monastic order. Quint was horrified to see the levels of flagellation and mutilation that he had inflicted on himself. For years in his court, Quint could hear his tortured howls in his tower. He cut himself in the side with knives, drank poisons that sent him into bone-racking convulsions, and even threw himself from the tallest spires of the castle. But at no time did the madman appear to enjoy this self-imposed torture; it was simply his role, his duty. There was no pleasure in it. Quint had thought that Myrddin was testing the limits of his immortality, charting the physiology of "our kind," as he put it. It made sense; over the years his escapades grew even more daring. At the last, he covered himself in oils and was about to burn himself had Quint not intervened, forbidding the lunatic to make further spectacle of himself.

Quint pointed onward, to the villagers walking the snowy streets of Pokrovskoye with bowed heads, each to their appointed tasks. "I carry the pain of thirty of their lifetimes. I have enough. Do you really think it's God's will that we continue this mad existence, Myrddin?"

"Call me Grigori, Arthur," he said patiently. Together they walked across the frozen, hard-packed road, away from the town. Across this windswept tundra they could see for miles in all directions with little more to see than ice and scrub brush that somehow eked out a stranglehold existence on the nearly lifeless plain. "I have begun my new life here. That's what you need, old friend. To use what you know now and make for yourself a better life. We have time enough all for redemption, Arthur. Even you. In time, the pain you feel will pass."

"I can't forget her face," Quint wept, the tears stinging hot on his pale cheeks, "and every time I think of

how peaceful, how accepting she looked as I took her life, the pain is worse. If you can't help me, I know that I won't be able to go on. I would rather that Marie hate me, to look at me with judging eyes that curse my very soul instead of with the love I saw there. I was never worthy of such love or trust."

"You think little of your own worth," said Grigori. "Your knights and I loved you, and would have ridden against the very gates of Hell, such was the trust we placed in you."

"It was misplaced."

"Then you insult their memories and me," the madman snapped. He almost seemed on the verge of violence in that instant, the pupils of his eyes tiny black pinholes in the glaring light reflected up from the frozen white snow. But as quickly as the rage had come, he laughed a tittering mirthful laugh that went on too long and made him seem all the more insane. "But you have ever needed me to bolster your confidence. You can't see your own strengths. Yet your humility is what makes you a great leader of men. It is why I served you as my liege."

"Then serve me now," Quint said, on the verge of dropping to his knees before the man and begging him outright for his aid. "You've said that you can perform miracles. Or magic. I don't know whether I've ever truly believed that you can work magic, but if we are truly immortal, then I'll take a chance and believe that magic is possible as well."

Grigori dismissed Quint with an angry wave of his hand and started walking back to the village. Quint called after him, but the man did not slow.

"You don't truly want what you're asking for, Arthur. You don't get to pick and choose the memories and experiences you keep with you. They are all part of God's tapestry!"

"Rasputin!" Quint threw his coat away and drew his swords, making sure that Grigori heard them leave their sheaths.

The man stopped walking and turned his head a bit to speak over his shoulder. "What will you do, my lord Arthur? Stab me until I agree to cast a spell on you?"

Quint took a step forward, then halted with a hoarse curse. He flung his weapons into the tundra, falling to his knees in abject frustration. Rasputin sat beside him quietly while his friend gathered control of his wits, busying himself studying bits of stringy grass plucked from the soil.

"Shall I tell you my secret, Arthur? Would you like to know how to face eternity?"

Quint snorted, "You want to give me advice on how to stay sane?"

"You think me mad, yet ever have you come for my counsels. You come to me because I have a clarity of thought that you do not. You come to me because I've never lied to you. I've sworn to be loyal to you until the end, and to that oath I hold. That's why I can't help you with magic."

“This is the last I’ll come for your help. And I’ll do anything you ask in return. I swear it. Just please, if there is any way you could drive Marie from my mind—”

Grigori removed his cap. His hair blew into his eyes and mouth, but he seemed not to notice. “You have this enormous gift, and you have done much with it. You’ve raised a nation, started wars, crafted legends in your name. You did this because you had a fire within you. You had desire. Your motivations are still unclear to me, whether it be glory to God or glory to yourself, I can’t say. But that time has passed, Arthur. Or Quint, or whatever you want to call yourself now. You’ve no fire, no inspiration. And now you stagnate, dwelling on your failures when you’ve accomplished so much. When you have so much more to accomplish. So I ask you, Arthur, friend, a simple question: what do you want?”

Quint was taken aback. “What do I want?”

“Yes,” Grigori nodded eagerly. “Your Marie is dead. What do you want? Revenge?”

“I have my revenge already. Now there’s nothing left for me.”

“Then what do you desire now? Power? To lead men as you once did? To help people? To acquire knowledge? What of the Prize? The time of The Gathering will soon be at hand, when the few of us who remain will battle to the last. What do you want?”

Quint knuckled his brow in consternation. “I don’t know! I’m tired of this game. I’m tired of being forced to kill because I’ve been told it’s in my nature to do so. Why? Who told me that? How do they know there’s any end to this? How do you know there’s a Prize? Why was I chosen? Why were you chosen? Who did the choosing? God? Do you think God chose us to slaughter each other for his amusement? I want to know these things, and those are the questions I can never find answers to.”

“Can’t you?” Grigori looked to the rising sun, stroking his chin thoughtfully. Finally he spoke again.

“Before you found me, I was court bard to my lord. I watched him die on the battlefield, a victim of my cowardice and treachery. I saw such blood that day, it did indeed drive me mad. The horror of what I’d done, shame at what I’d not done, and the powerlessness I felt as I saw thousands fall drove me to fall upon my own sword. But I did not die.”

“One of God’s saints spoke to me as my heart grew still and quit. There on the plain between Liddel and Carwannok, surrounded by the dead and dying—all victims of my folly—I saw a luminous being clad in silver and white. He reached his hand down to me and bid me rise. And so I did. And there, Saint Kentigern judged me guilty of my sins. His punishment was just, the souls of the dead served as jury. He condemned me to wander the Earth forever to eternally seek absolution.”

“When the saint left, I roamed the forests keeping only the company of beasts. I felt unworthy to rejoin the company of Man, such was my shame. Shepherds recognized me, and they took me as a traitor, where I died deaths triple. They beat me with clubs and stones, drowned me in the river as a witch in league with the devil, and there was impaled with a stake.”

“When you came upon me, still dangling from a spike of wood, frozen in the water, you freed me despite my cries that I was unworthy of salvation. I confessed my sins to you then, and you freed me anyway. I realized then that even one so wretched as I can find forgiveness and kindness. Even one as wicked as I can do good in this world. You gave me this knowledge, a belief in God and a belief in myself. I believe that my immortality is a gift from God, who sees in me the potential to earn my place in Heaven through the Prize. I can better myself. And when I speak my advice to you, it is to better you. That is what I believe I am here to do.”

“Perhaps you can’t find the answers you seek. But it’s a worthy quest, don’t you think? It’s worthy of you, Arthur, that quest which many might think impossible. Like your quest for the Grail, or the Spear. You should go, and find your answers.”

Quint shook his head. “What good would they do? They won’t bring Marie back. They won’t erase my failures or my shame.”

“Neither can I,” added Rasputin. “I can only erase them from your mind, which you must realize is hardly the same thing.”

“It will do!” Quint cried. “Her voice speaks to me, and she’ll not be silent! I want her gone! She should be at rest, not trapped in my memory.”

Grigori shrieked in laughter. Quint looked at his former advisor in a mixture of horror and confusion, and when Grigori tried to meet his eyes, he was unable to hold his look and leapt to his feet. Soon Myrddin’s laughs were breathless, teary spasms so intense that he leaned forward with his hands on his knees until he’d recovered.

“Why are you laughing? You always claimed to be a mystic but I’ve never seen any proof of magic. Can you do it or can’t you? Why do you laugh?”

“So, we’re both mad now, eh?” Rasputin mocked. “Voices and torment? Little wonder you sought me out.”

Quint gathered up his swords and turned to leave. “This was a mistake. I knew you were a fraud.”

“You thought that 1,300 years ago too, when you asked for the exact same thing.”

Quint stopped. “What?” But Rasputin only smiled at him knowingly. “This is the first time I’ve ever asked you this.”

“Oh no, Arthur, it isn’t.”

Grigori Rasputin withdrew an object from his coat pocket, a small glimmering pendant from a thin golden chain that shone like fire and ice in the orange glow of the sunrise. “You came to me after a

nightmare, begging me for a spell that would purge you of a painful memory. Knowing that you did not believe in magic but praying that you were wrong. And you were wrong, Arthur. I made the mistake of granting your wish that night, a mistake I'll not repeat."

Quint stared at the crystalline pendant, enraptured by the fiery rainbow of colors trapped within it. "What did I ask you to help me forget?"

Rasputin drew close to Quint, chuckling quietly. "I think you begin to see now why you were a fool to come here. You don't want to know, but now that I've told you this, you have to know. And once I've told you..." he swung the pendant gently, a private smile crossing his lips. "...well, such are the frailties of the human mind. It's time you forgot about me, now. It will save us both this embarrassment a third time."

Quint swayed on his feet, as if held aloft by an invisible string connected to the top of his head. His voice was dreamy, and came from high in his throat. "Forget you?"

"Yes," Rasputin nodded. "It saddens me to know that you will never remember how much I've helped you, but I'll keep my end of the bargain. I will keep the memories you first asked me to remove buried. But your love for Marie, you will always remember. When I count to three, you will awaken and leave this place for America. I wish you luck on your new quest, Artorius Dexion, my liege. Perhaps later I'll seek you out and help you to remember why your other quests were in vain. You should get a good laugh out of what happened to the Holy Grail and the Spear of Destiny, eh?"

Chapter Twenty One:Stitches

Rúla Búla Irish Pub & Restaurant
London, England
November 8, 2004 – 11:50 PM

Champley folded his coat over the back of the chair and sat with Donahl. The look on his face was irrepressibly smug, the smile of a cat toying with a dead mouse. He was about the last person Jack wanted to see, but the sight of crisscrossing black stitches covering two wide lacerations on his head put a smile on his face. It's not often one gets to club his boss in the head with the butt of a pistol, and it still felt good.

"Hullo, Erik."

"Hello, Jack," Champley said. "Expecting somebody?"

"Not anymore."

Champley gave out a brief chortle. "Well put. Come with me. There's a car waiting for us outside. Time for us to take a ride. I'd rather not settle this publicly with so many witnesses, but if you try to run or make a scene rest assured that nobody will look too deeply into a wanted terrorist being killed with a sniper's bullet to the head. In fact, I think your friend with MI-5 will rather enjoy the irony."

"Just got my beer," Donahl said icily. He lifted up the glass bottle to take a swig.

"Take it with you. Far be it from me to deprive a dead man of a last drink."

Champley led him out the front door of the pub, where a sleek limousine sat waiting, a bulging gorilla of a man holding one of the rear doors open for the man. Erik climbed inside, but the bodyguard stopped Donahl with a hand to his chest before he could follow. He proceeded to pat Jack down for weapons from collar to ankle, caring little that he was doing it in the middle of the sidewalk. He removed the straight razor Jack kept in his pocket along with everything else he could find, including his money clip, wristwatch, cellular phone, and palmtop computer. Then he ushered Donahl into the car and sat next to him. Champley sat opposite him on the bench seat, his face shadowy and sunken in the weak yellow glow of the running lights in the back of the car.

As soon as the bodyguard shut the door, the car rolled forward and pulled into traffic. The streetlights washed through the tinted windows at regular intervals, casting everything in a sickly purple glow every few seconds. The bodyguard handed over Donahl's possessions to Champley, who gave them hardly a glance and set them aside.

"Did you really think you'd lost us? We're everywhere, Jack, and it wasn't exactly hard to track Quint down after he decided to develop a death wish and attack the Three Dragons directly."

Donahl sighed and took another sip of his beer.

"And you should have known better than to think the encryption on the Heimdall file could be broken. It would have taken them centuries to decrypt files classified three security levels lower than that."

Jack quirked his eyebrows up knowingly, still taking a long pull of his drink.

Realization began to dawn on Champley's face. He pulled his glasses off and folded them in his lap. "You knew that. Of course you knew that."

"Of course I knew that. The file is useless to me. There's no decryptin' it. An' no point in trying. Even if Oi did, what could I possibly find out that would save Quint? For a while I thought maybe yer story was a loada sh**e. Thought maybe if I cracked the file I'd find somethin' that would clear everythin' up. Make it safe for him. But there isn't, is there?"

Erik shook his head. "Dexter Quint is a pariah among his own kind, Jack. If you knew what was in the file, you'd want him dead, too. But you're right; it's not important. Soon Quint will be dead and the Gathering will begin. It's already begun. The word has spread: every Immortal in Europe is headed here,

and more beyond. That's how hungry they are for his blood, Jack. Even if he escaped here today, he can't run forever. None of you can."

Donahl nodded again. "He knows that. It's all over, Erik. You've won. You'll have your war."

"Why the deception, then? Why come here and give the file to a man you knew had no chance at reading it? We're going to recover the computer anyway as soon as he comes to your meeting. I still don't understand why you involved him in this. You know what we'll have to do with him."

"Because I don't think Harry will have much of a problem reading what I put on that hard drive."

Erik Champley's smile slipped. "What..." he smacked his lips, which had suddenly gone dry. "Jack, what have you done?"

"I just gave MI-5 my journal. My notes, videos, and all my records. I gave them names. I gave them the addresses of every Watcher enclave that I know. I may not know everything, Erik, but I know where the bodies are buried."

"You know we have safeguards against that kind of thing," Champley scoffed. "We can burn every hard drive on the premises at a moment's notice. Everything is deniable. There's nothing that ties me or the rest of the Council to anything incriminating."

"There are two things, actually." Donahl slowly reached over the seat to grab up his palmtop computer, across the lap of the poleaxed Watcher. "See, I made sure he had a copy of our little recording in Rockland." With that, he touched the screen a few times until the little device started producing the sound of Champley's voice.

"I was outvoted, Jack. I asked them not to have you terminated. The Watchers' Council, I mean. I told them they could trust you, that you'd understand."

Champley gave a nervous laugh, "That won't hold up. Doesn't prove anything. Everything we talked about in that office sounds like something out of a movie anyway. Nobody would take it seriously."

"Oi thought so, too. Which is why my friend at MI-5—the one yeh just said you were going to kill—is listening to this entire conversation right now from the black sedan that's right behind us."

Champley started to shift in his seat, looking more and more like a caged animal. Donahl lifted one of the lapels of his coat to reveal a small dime-sized gray circle affixed to the fabric. "Wasnae t'always a Watcher, Erik. Oi've still got some friends from the old days."

"You're—you're insane. You're not gonna walk away from this, Jack. You'll burn for this, too."

"Wasn't it Nietzsche who said 'In Heaven all the interesting people are missing?' Never liked to quote the son of a bitch but I bet he was a f***in' laugh sometimes." Donahl raised the bottle to his lips.

“Cheers.”

Champley’s eyes drifted to the right, to the bodyguard seated next to Donahl. The old man was waiting for a signal like this: an imperceptible affirmative glance. Champley wasn’t going to wait any longer; he was getting froggy. He probably still figured he had the connections to disappear somewhere. Donahl could see the bodyguard’s hand slip into his jacket, and wasted no more time.

Jack turned his head and spit a mouthful of beer into his would-be killer’s eyes. The man dropped whatever it was he was holding, something slim and metal that clattered hollowly to the carpeted floor of the limousine. Champley backed up against the door, reaching into his jacket for his own weapon, but Donahl knew that he was no killer. Champley fumbled in his panic, and before his gun had come clear Donahl smashed the bottle across the side of his head, almost directly where he’d struck him with his pistol a week ago. The bottle split into a jagged, knifelike shard with a crude longneck handle.

The bodyguard was leaned over, groping blindly for his weapon. Jack took him by the scruff of his hair and raked the edge of the glass across his neck with one cruel twist. The big man gurgled, hands immediately seeking his neck. He looked up at Donahl in horror and sank into his seat, pressing his hands into his throat in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. Maybe he could, maybe not; Jack didn’t care.

“Stitch that, Jimmy.”

Champley moaned, his hands covering his eyes. Blood from his ripped stitches and the broken bottle ran slick down the side of his face. His gun lie forgotten between his legs. Jack crossed over to the other seat and took it.

“Tell your driver ta pull over and lie face down on the ground.”

“You hit me in the same place, you son of a—“

“I know. There’s just something about that face. Do it.”

The car slowed to a halt. Champley was breathing fast. Clearly the sight of the dying man in the other seat and his own pain had him terrified, and Jack had to use it while he could.

“Can you call this off?”

Champley turned to Donahl, eyes twitching around as if he were looking for escape. “What are you going to do to me?”

“The situation with Quint. The Watchers are helping Immortals find him, right?” Champley nodded. “Can you call it off? Remove this death mark you’ve placed on him?”

“I don’t know!” Champley pleaded. “I...I can try. I can make some phone calls, but our secrecy is

compromised. How will we—“

“Do it! You hypocritical little sh**e. You’ve ruined us. You and the rest of the Council broke our cardinal law. If it’s the last thing I do I’ll see every Watcher who was involved in this punished, Erik. The Watchers are going to be rebuilt without you.”

Champley retrieved his phone and started dialing, but something prevented him from pushing the final button to connect his call. He looked fearfully at Donahl. “Jack, even if I do this, it’s too late. Artorius Dexion and Rasputin have already gone to confront him—“

“What?” Donahl gaped at him in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Rasputin found him, Jack. Found Quint’s son.”

“That’s not possible. It can’t be possible.”

“Firstborn sons of the time took the same name as their fathers. Maybe he’s a bastard son. Maybe Rasputin got in his head. I don’t know. But as we speak they’re on their way to kill Quint and the girl with him. To them, this is personal on a level few of us will ever understand.”

Donahl almost kicked the door open and backed out into the sidewalk. Harry Whitehall kneeled over the driver, handcuffing his arms behind his back. He looked to Jack, who nodded anxiously towards the car. “Take him in for me, will yeh? I have to go.”

Whitehall stood up, calling after him, “Jack!”

But he was already climbing into Harry’s car. “You know I’m as good as my word, Harry.”

Champley staggered out of the car and onto the sidewalk, blood trailing onto the sidewalk from his forehead. “They’re going to kill him, Jack! You can’t stop it! They know everything. Who do you think gave us the files on Quint in the first place?”

Donahl sped off into the London night in his commandeered vehicle. Harry Whitehall slapped a pair of handcuffs on Champley with a prolonged sigh. “Now that Irish bastard has stolen my car. Again.”

“He hit me!”

“Shut up. Wanker.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: PARIAH

Golgotha, near Jerusalem

33 AD

Sunrise

The orange twilight flared blindingly up from beneath the hill of Golgotha, making the soil and everything on it look black and surrounded by fiery halos that burned the eyes with their terrible majesty. The light caught the ends of the Roman guardsmens' spears as they stood sentry, flashing with each subtle shift in their weight and movement in their arms. A few of them, particularly a vulture-necked armsman named Gallus amused themselves by angling the points of their weapons so that the light shone into the eyes of the mourning crowd that had gathered around the hill.

Beneath his armor, Gallus was a stick-armed skeletal bird of a man, with a high-throated laugh that made Dexion want to rip out his lungs. He was making that laugh now, a nasal hyena laugh that cut through the heavy, dusty air as he tormented the mourners. His friends amused themselves thusly for a time, but soon grew bored of such childishness. Gallus never failed to see the humor in it, though, and continued for an hour after the others had stopped. Dexion knew this, even though he could not see Gallus, because of that damnable laugh.

Finally Cassius had had enough. He turned to Dexion, his teeth set with annoyance that bordered on impending violence. "Let us quit this place, Quintus. I hate this place. I hate Jerusalem, I hate these grimy beggars, I hate this heat, and I tell you I hate that man most of all."

"Don't whine, Gaius. It's good that we see this."

Cassius tore his helmet off and mopped his brow with his forearm. "This? Crucifixions? I've seen them, Quintus. All the time. It's boring, and this armor..." Gaius Cassius complained as he fussed with the straps, "...it's beneath me. It's beneath you. We could be living as princes, but instead you insist on sweating your immortality away in this wasteland like some rat because—why, you think it builds character to toil like a plebe?"

"You can leave any time you want. I've no hold over you."

Cassius spat into the dust and worked his helmet back down over his sweaty head. "Maybe I shall."

They stood their post in silence for a time. Cassius did little but observe their long, pointed shadows shorten as the sun began to rise over the hill. Dexion watched the crowd of spectators gather as the morning grew. Most watched silently, their faces sullen or angry at their powerlessness and the injustice of the executions they could only see through a haze of wind-blown dust atop the hill. Quintus could see one woman in particular, near-hysterical in her grief as she circled the crowd, looking uselessly for a place to get through their perimeter. She tried begging each man in the line, but they could no more let her pass than they could every other mourner.

Cassius sighed, "Why are we really here? If you tell me what I'm meant to see, I'll look, but I cannot think you asked me to come so urgently so that we could watch a crowd of Jews all day."

Dexion shrugged and pointed carelessly into the crowd. "Ask them why they're here. It matters a great

deal to them. You should take an interest into matters such as this instead of indulging yourself as time passes unnoticed outside your ivory tower.”

“Ahh,” Cassius breathed, “you’re teaching me the way of things now?”

“Is such a thing beneath you?”

Cassius laughed, “Quintus, don’t be so bitter.” Something drew his attention and he nudged Dexion’s shoulder. “Quintus, look.”

Dexion looked into the crowd to see a tall, haggard man with a slight but tough build shoulder his way through the crowd. Dexion crossed his spear in front of his chest and held the man at bay. “Stay back,” he commanded.

“Please,” the man said, “my name is Simon. You spoke to me earlier on the road to the hill this morning. You told me to help him carry the cross and—“

“I remember. Step back.”

“On the other side of the hill,” Simon insisted, “one of the Romans has allowed some men through to the top of the hill. They throw stones and spit on the men on the crosses. Please, will you not stop them?”

Dexion looked up at the hill and swore under his breath. So Gallus had found some other way to be cruel after all. Simon caught his arm. “Sir, would you lay these things at his feet?” He thrust a small cloth-wrapped bundle that smelled of flowers and incense into Dexion’s hands. “We would honor our lord but we cannot get any closer than here.”

Dexion looked and saw that there were indeed flowers and small treasures collected there. He saw the glimmer of gold and silver, and heard the clack of wood within. Simon placed a great deal of trust in him not to simply steal these things, as little as it all might be worth. But Dexion nodded to him and carried the bundle under his arm. He ran up the hill, urging Cassius to follow. Simon had spoken the truth; there Gallus sat on a rough stone making much sport of three men hurling rocks and spittle at the men suffering on the wooden crucifixes. None of them offered more than low, breathless moans of misery, even as the stones cut into their flesh and drew fresh blood. One struck a condemned thief in the head, making a wet, ugly sound. The man didn’t move and might already have been dead.

“See now,” called their leader, a swarthy Roman called, probably an off-duty soldier, “do you think I can 😊:):) on that one up there from here?”

Gallus shrieked in mirth, “I’ll wager half a dinari you can’t get it in his mouth.”

“Impossible,” joined a third, “but try anyway!”

Dexion clubbed him in the head with the shaft of his spear. "If any man here tries I'll cut off your manhood and shove it down your throat. Begone! All of you."

They backed down the hill and departed, one looking scornfully at Dexion while covering a swollen eye. Gallus leapt off his seat, his fun ruined. "What does it matter, Dexion? Longinus? He's soon dead."

"And how would you feel were you in his place?"

"Ah, but I'm not, am I?" Gallus grinned. "But I'll play, Dexion. Intense pain? Stupidity? Embarrassment? Why, I'd be outraged! I'm the king of the Jews! I'd take him down from that cross right now if he would but command me. Oh, but I forgot," Gallus pointed up to the man hanging in the center, his body decorated with seeping wounds and a crooked crown of thorns kicked into his eyes, "he could call on his God to pull him from there. Or perhaps he could call on God to strike me down with lightning from Heaven for my impertinence!"

The man on the cross groaned feverishly. Gallus jumped in surprise, his face flushing with embarrassment. "Some king he'll look by the end when he chokes to death on his own blood and he sh**s himself. Dexion, if you care so much, break his legs so he can't pull himself up. You'll spare him hours."

Dexion scowled as the soldier somehow found humor in the prospect. "Go to your post, Gallus."

Gallus rolled his eyes, "This bores me anyway." He headed back to the perimeter in a pout.

Now that they were again alone, Cassius urgently shook Dexion's arm. "Quintus, up there. This man being crucified, Jesus of Nazareth. He's one of us."

Dexion nodded. Somehow he knew the bare few mortals who had the unkindled spark of immortality in them. He didn't know how it was possible, or what it was about such people that betrayed the secret, but it plain to see who among them who was an Immortal. Or who could become Immortal.

"No," Quintus frowned, "he's not."

"You know what I mean."

"I mean that he's not one of us. And he's not going to be."

Cassius' confusion was plain. "What?" Then realization dawned on him, and his face grew bright again. "Ah, I see. You think that if he dies on the cross as he is, he won't rise again. Rather ingenious thinking, Quintus. I'm impressed. Crucifixion is slow—very slow, and painful, hardly the sudden end needed to fan the flame within us. So what do you want to do?"

"Nothing."

“Nothing? But he’ll die.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Because this is the way he wants to die: a martyr. I made him a promise not to interfere.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Quintus,” said Cassius, “I’d no more let this man die than I’d have killed you where I found you. Such a waste of potential.”

Quintus raised his hands defensively. “It isn’t what he wants. It’s not my place-“

“He doesn’t know what he wants. All of us are chosen to lead and to struggle. It’s our destiny, and you would deny him that? I’ve heard of this Jesus, Quintus. I’m not entirely clueless. Look at those people,” he gestured to the gathered masses far beneath them, “we could give them their savior back. A man who dies for his people and returns from the grave to lead them again? Think of the power he could wield. They believe in him already, and to witness such a miracle, they’d think him a god on Earth!”

Cassius looked dizzy imagining the possibilities, “If they knew the truth about you or I, they’d destroy us. But him? Him they’d worship. We could be a part of that.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Quintus shrugged, opening the bundle given to him by Simon and arranging the objects he found within at the bottom of the cross. “But it’s not our choice to make.”

Quintus withdrew a smothered handful of wildflowers from the cloth and did his best to make them look presentable before laying them down in the bloody dust. He took out the last item, a crude wooden cup, nicked and scratched from long use. He thought it a strange thing to lay at the feet of a dying man, and found himself examining it closely. He turned it in his hands.

Something hot landed across his arm and the back of his hands. He looked and saw that his hand was covered in blood. More fell onto his hands and into the cup he carried, and he dropped it in surprise. He looked up to see Gaius Cassius Longinus wrenching his spear from between the ribs of the crucified man, the sun over his shoulder making him look mountainous and black, and the blood falling from the point of his spear glistened like dark rubies. The man on the cross, Jesus, made no sound except perhaps the imperceptible escape of his breath between lips sticky with blood.

“What you don’t understand, Quintus, is that it is our choice. We are gods among insects, answerable only to ourselves and to the steel of our enemies. We are no common people.”

Dexion fell back in horror, then scrambled to his feet and tore the spear from Cassius’ grasp. “What have you done? I made a promise!”

“Giving this king a chance to rule. Waste not.”

"I gave him my word of honor, Gaius. We are finished, you and I. You'll have my protection no longer. When next we meet, I hope you'll have learned to defend yourself."

Cassius laughed, but only momentarily. "You're serious."

Dexion turned his back to the Immortal and signaled to some of the other men to come hence. "Good-bye, Gaius."

Together the two men stood at the bank of the river, and Dexion felt fearful despite knowing that the man he was looking at was unarmed. He had eyes that held power and a smile that could put joy into the hardest hearts. Seeing him here in the moonlight, he understood why people followed Jesus of Nazareth with but a gesture. He didn't believe in Jesus' god, but even he thought that he would follow if Jesus asked him, simply to be near his radiance. There was something right about being near him.

"I tried to find you, to explain," said Quintus, "but the tomb was guarded. When I next came to look, the tomb had been unsealed and you had gone. I didn't know what to think."

"I heard you speaking, you and your friend. And for a time I was afraid. I doubted. And when I rose again, I thought perhaps...I thought..." but he trailed off, looking sadly towards the flowing water. "I have tried living your life here on Earth, but the temptation is over. I will be immortal, but not as you are. I ask you now to keep your word to me and make my message truly eternal."

"I don't know if I can."

Jesus laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, and together they walked into the cool waters where he knelt. The water circled around his chest, and he bowed his head. "It is fitting that it ends here, where it began in this beautiful river. Don't you think?"

Quintus unsheathed his blades.

Chapter Twenty Three: Ascension

Kensal Green Cemetery

London, England

November 8, 2004 – 2:20 AM

"And now you die, Quintus. Oh yes. Now you die."

"They're in here with us, killer."

"But not for long, oh no."

"Coward. Liar. Murderer. Heretic."

Quint tore his eyes away from the talisman, released from whatever spell Myrddin—Rasputin—had held him with. He knelt down and covered Kelli with his jacket to keep the rain off of her, but it was pointless. She already lay in water and blood, eyes sightlessly gazing at some distant point in the sky. He closed them as he pulled the jacket over her face.

“You involved her in this, Arthur,” Myrddin called from the square hatch of the sepulcher. “No different from a soldier in your war. No different from the thousands of men who followed you to their deaths in the past. If it makes you feel better, she died in service of your cause. There is honor in that.”

“Honor. You shot an unarmed woman in the back.”

“You cut a crippled woman’s head off. Do I win?”

Quint gathered his swords. “You’ve got the gun. Looks that way.”

Rasputin glanced at his hand, as if he’d forgotten that he held a pistol. “Oh! This. I’m not going to shoot you, Quintus. That’s the last thing I want to do. Come up with me. There are some people here who would very much like to speak with you.”

Quint could feel them. Two others, awaiting him atop the tomb. He recognized one of them, and suddenly things made much more sense to him. He stood on a trunk to reach the lip of the hatchway, and as he climbed, he realized that he’d carelessly stepped over Kelli’s body. I’ve stepped over bodies my whole life. Even when I try to set things right it seems I can’t win, and people like her suffer. Is there any use in denying my purpose? Is killing all I’m meant to do?

Hands grasped his wrists and helped him outside. Quint didn’t bother struggling. If they wanted him dead they’d had him trapped in a stone tomb with a gun trained on him. No, all of this, everything that had happened was about more than simple murder. It was about delivering a message hundreds of years in the saying.

Quint backed away from the three Immortals standing around him to avoid being surrounded. They made no moves for their weapons, even as he put his in hand. Rasputin stood between two men, wearing a soaked-through fur coat—probably a designer creation and incredibly expensive, but now ruined—over a tailored suit. The others he heard better than he could see. The pouring rain made loud sounds against their jackets. The only light came from the shrouded moon and the distant lamp posts spread irregularly through the cemetery, shining off their bodies wetly as if they’d been dipped in molten silver.

“Ave, Dexion.” The man on the right clapped his fist across his chest and saluted him in the old Roman style. He would know that voice anywhere.

“You look exactly as I remember,” said the other, stepping forward. He also gave a salute, and as he did so, Quint could see the weapons the man wore under his long leather coat: two gladii slung alongside

his legs, much as Quint had done when he still wore his blades openly. The man stopped a short distance from him and folded his hands. "But of course you don't recognize me. My name is Artorius Dexion."

"But I've taken to calling him Mordred. A sort of 'life-imitates-art' gesture," said Rasputin.

Quint started to laugh at the absurdity of it but found the spirit lacking. The man before him looked older than he did, but Quint of all people knew how little that meant to an Immortal, whose faces stayed frozen in an ageless lie, their bodies arrested at one point in time forevermore. He had a son once, or thought he had. But since his death at the hands of Caesar at Pelusium, Quint had never fathered another child and had heard that such things were impossible for all Immortals. They were not meant to produce offspring, something Quint thought was fitting and right. But Quint wondered if it had always been so, before he'd been cursed. When his life was simpler.

Quint looked to Rasputin, whose eyes were masked behind the glare of his spectacles. "What have you told him, Myrddin? It's a lie. It's not possible."

Rasputin tittered with laughter. "I have never lied to you, Quintus. Your wife, on the other hand, was never honest with you at all. She admitted as much to dear Cassius in the last moments of her adulterous life."

Cassius shook his head, "When you mentioned having a son, I couldn't bear to tell you. But neither could I let such a grave hurt to my friend go unavenged. Oh, don't look at me like that, Quint," he paced towards him, shouting over the rain, "At the time you would have done the exact same thing to an unfaithful wife."

Quint turned back at the man who called himself Artorius Dexion. "Even if this is true, I was never...if this is about revenge for my not being there—"

"What? No!" Mordred laughed, looking at Quint as if he were being ridiculous. "You did what you felt was right. And I think it was the right thing to do. What else could you have done, return home as if nothing were wrong? Explain this extraordinary thing that happened to you when none of us understood? I came to terms with the death of my parents a long time ago. Mother and, well, and you. Cassius and Grigori told me everything in time. Really, father. Quint. Whatever you think I should call you. I don't think you need your swords here tonight." Mordred motioned calmly for him to lower his weapons.

"I don't understand any of this!" Quint cried. "There are people following me, hounding my every step. I'm hunted everywhere I go, and it's all because of you three, isn't it? I have nowhere to go that's safe anymore. You've killed my friend. You—" Quint choked back his own tears. "Am I being punished for what I've done in the past? Am I supposed to learn something out of all this?"

Rasputin considered, "Have you?"

“Have I—“

“What you take away from this experience is what’s important,” Rasputin said.

“Why are you doing this to me?” shouted Quint.

Rasputin and Cassius looked hurt at the accusation. They looked at each other, until Grigori spoke with a somber tone, “I’m sworn to fealty to you, something which I’ve taken very seriously. We’re not ‘doing’ anything to you, Quintus. We’re trying to help you.”

“Help me.” Quint was incredulous.

“Yes, help you. Look at what you did to the Dragons in Japan, Quintus. Do you remember that? You emerged from there blazing with power, still drunk with it. Dizzy from the quickenings of your enemies. Why did you go there? Hm?”

“I...” Quint tried to explain properly, “I didn’t want to run anymore.”

“You did there to do murder,” Cassius grinned. “Brutal, terrible murder to everyone in that building.”

“Just like you’d done when you’d first met me,” Rasputin joined in, “You were a king in those days! You crushed the Saxons, and together we rode—“

“It was butchery!”

“It was glorious!” Rasputin screamed over him. “And what changed? You! What was it, guilt? I took your guilt from you, and you found more. Was it your precious Marie that turned a conqueror into a worm?”

“Damn you, Myrddin, for even breathing her name to anyone. You were the only one I spoke her true name to, weren’t you?”

“I did what I had to do to awaken what was sleeping within you for so long,” Rasputin growled.

“I don’t think you ever understood what we’re meant for on this Earth,” said Cassius. “Understand this, Quint: you’re not human anymore. I don’t know how you’ve gone for so long still feeling so much for people whose lives are so short. You’re older than most of the trees they’ve ever seen. Doesn’t that change your perspective at all?”

Mordred approached Quint with open hands. “We needed the real you. The king. The man you’ve spent centuries denying.”

“Stay back,” warned Quint, raising his sword.

“And you’ve done so well,” Rasputin said soothingly, “Calm yourself. You’ve proven that you still have

the spirit, the drive, the skill to become the conqueror you once were! That's why we're here, Quintus. We are here to join you."

Thunder rolled overhead, accompanied with a rapid series of lightning flashes. Quint stared at them, horrified into muteness. He looked between them, wondering at once who among the four of them on this tomb had gone the most insane.

"I never asked you to do any of this," Quint said at last.

"Of course not," Mordred smiled, "But the three of us are in complete agreement. We love you, all three of us, as comrade, friend, and father. If there's one thing in this world you can count on anymore, it's that we would die for you in the days to come. The Gathering—"

"Forget the Gathering!" Quint roared. "It's all bulls**t, isn't it? All of it! More of your lies, Rasputin? There's no way you could possibly know any of this, no matter who I might have killed."

"You are the Gathering," Rasputin declared. "You're tired of all this. We're all tired. Whether they believe or not the stories I've told them, they will come for you. You offer a hope that there is an end. A light at the end of the tunnel. I know this because I believe in our purpose. I believe in God, and I believe in you. You were chosen to assume the power of our Lord within you, and take it with you to victory."

"I suppose you know what the Prize is, as well."

"No," Myrddin scowled, "But have you ever considered that the Prize will only be won by the fittest warrior among us? Have you ever asked yourself why? God has some purpose for that last warrior—the best warrior. Some task, some enemy beyond what we can conceive, that only the One can defeat. You, Quintus, are that man. Let us help you. Cassius and I, and Mordred, are willing to accept that we are not destined to survive this. But we will fight this war against all the assembled Immortals together."

"You have the power to influence nations," Cassius said, pointing down into the tomb. "You have the spear that I used to take Christ's life. You have the cup that caught his blood. Think of the power of those symbols in your hands. We could cast off the veil of secrecy that we hide behind and rule openly as we were meant to."

"You mean, I could rule."

Cassius blinked in confusion. "What?"

"I could rule. Not we." Quint quirked his eyebrow at Cassius, who gaped at him in surprise.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I was—"

Quint held up a hand to silence him. "It's all right. I just have one question: what happens if I refuse?"

It was Mordred who spoke now, his voice low and laced with intent. "Then you are not the man I hoped you were, and I'll happily take your place."

Quint saw both men circle around to flank him, hands moving to rest on the grips of their swords. "Don't be such a fool that you don't recognize when you've won," Cassius said, his last attempt to sway the situation. "Your only chance at the Prize is with us. Even if you killed us all, you'll never be able to stand alone against the others. Not all of them."

Quint spun his swords around in his hands, letting a gallows smirk cross his lips, "John Keats once said 'I never can feel certain of any truth, but from a clear perception of its beauty.' I've never been a poet. I have no doubt that you meant everything you said. It's probably true. But inside you're the ugliest people I've ever seen. I'd rather die than become one of you."

Rasputin nodded in understanding. "So be it." He raised his pistol and fired. Quint made a move towards Cassius, but the bullet tore through his side. His left leg collapsed beneath him, and he fell, dropping one of his swords to clutch a hand protectively against the wound. He lurched back up to try and stand, but Cassius had long since moved away. Quint felt another shot shatter his kneecap, heard himself screaming as Mordred kicked away the arm that was holding him up.

He groaned as he fell to his back. Rainwater filled his mouth. Blood surged up from his throat, giving the water a coppery, thick taste. Hands gripped his arms and hauled him to his knees. His ribs howled in protest, and he felt muscle shred and pull against the broken bullet inside him. Mordred lifted his chin up to look at Rasputin, who knelt down with his gun across his knee, still smoking. The smell of cordite stung through the night air, steaming off the barrel of his gun.

"Hardly the storybook ending I'd written for you, Quintus," Myrddin told him sadly, "I hope you realize that I do this out of mercy."

The voices of the Others rejoiced deep within him, their wish finally fulfilled. One voice rose above the others, quieter by far. Calmer. But he heard it. Focused on it. It was a soothing voice, one that made Quint wonder why he ever tried to block it out. "How short is the longest life . . . I wish to live with you forever."

Quint laughed, as much as his ravaged body allowed. He decided to break his own rule; he spoke back to the voice. "Forgive me."

"Come home. It's time to rest. Have faith. I can still help you."

Quint smiled up at Mordred, finally at peace. He bowed his head, closed his eyes, and felt no pain when the end came. His son had made it clean.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Where Airy Voices Lead

Bellarmino Hall Dormitory, Seattle University
Seattle, Washington
August 18, 2002 – 8:30 AM

Kelli closed the gate behind her and could hear Stace sigh. She knew why, and when she turned around to look at her car, Kelli couldn't help but do it too. Her car was overloaded with all of the crap she'd collected over the course of 20 years, including the couch she'd basically stolen when she moved out of mom's apartment. It was almost bigger than her piece-of-sh*t Pacer, pendulously balanced atop the car's roof and held there with nylon rope, ten yards of that bungee cord stuff with hooks on the end, and her prayers. Covered with a scavenged blue tarpaulin, it looked like some great plastic parasite come from space to siphon the gasoline out of their puny Earth cars. Either that or it was humping her car from behind. Either way, she thought she'd better take it down.

"Jesus," Stace breathed, pulling a stocking cap on over her frazzled hair. She plucked at the tangle of bungee cords, looking for a weakness to this modern Gordian knot. "Where do we even start?"

"I got it." Kelli dove in through the back window and turned to her back, legs jutting awkwardly outside. She started undoing the knots, trying not to worry about the next phase of this plan: getting the calico monstrosity up to the second floor. There were no boys around to help this time, so she decided that if she and Stace couldn't do it, they'd leave it on the sidewalk—establish a beachhead in front of the dorm until some passing dudes saw them in distress.

"Um, it's moving! It's uh...capsizing?"

"Doesn't matter, this car is a piece of anyway. The couch too."

Stace tried to wrestle the couch down onto the asphalt without crushing herself. She was pretty cool about helping her move into the dorm, but she wore false nails that made her almost useless when it came to heavy lifting. Watching her try to set down a couch using only the palms of her hands was like watching a magician spin plates. Kelli decided to bail out of the car and rescue her. Her hands were already cut up from loading the stuff into the car anyway.

"This is never going to fit in the room," Stace said doubtfully. "Have you seen it?"

"Small?"

"Ever been to Japan?"

"Let's just take it through the gate. Maybe I can sell it or something."

It wasn't as hard to move as Kelli thought, although she nearly dropped it laughing at the sight of Stace turning purple, straining and grunting like she was having contractions. Kelli went to get her key while Stace recovered from the ordeal and got something to drink. When she returned, Stace knuckled the kinks out of the small of her back and gathered up a garbage bag full of clothes from the trunk.

"You okay?"

"Yeah!" Stace nodded. She looked confused that Kelli hadn't even broken a sweat. "You?"

"Yeah, no problem. Used to play soccer, and whenever we lost a game we had to run laps. Turns out I'm a sh*t soccer player but I've run so many laps I can probably destroy Thighmasters."

Stace laughed, "I'll be sure to mention that to anyone who asks. I think you'll be popular around here."

Kelli got her television from the back seat and together she and her new acquaintance plodded heavily up the stairs to the second floor of rooms. She could see that Stace was right; the doors to her right were spaced almost within a yard of each other. There was no way that the couch would have even fit through the door. It was about the size of her closet's door. She jimmied the door open by leaning against it and working the key in the lock with the television wedged under her arm and propped against the jam. She held it open by using the TV as a doorstop and went back down to the car for another load.

Stace was feeling daring; she took two garbage bags this time. "What's your major?"

"I don't know. I don't have one yet. I just started here."

"Yeah, me too."

"I'll probably go into engineering like my dad."

Stace crinkled her nose. "Engineering? What kind?"

"Yeah. City planning. It's..."

"You don't sound very fired up about it."

"I'm not, but I'm good at it, you know? I'm good at math. I mean my mom was a teacher, and I guess I could do that, but I hate getting up in front of people." Kelli set down her bags and paused to take a look around the dorm room. The air smelled slightly moldy, tinged with the scent of freshly-dried paint. She resolved to be organized, to develop an orderly system of unpacking and cleaning in defiance of every law of college life but knew deep down that the room would never again look as clean as it did now.

"Well come on," Stace insisted, "this is college. I mean, you can do like, anything you want now."

"Yeah, I know."

"So what do you want to do?"

"Nothing. I don't know." Kelli frowned, having already had this conversation with herself several times. "I'm only here because I've been told all my life that I should be here. You know, all those career advisors that came down to our junior high and high schools that basically told you that without a college degree, you'd be flipping burgers for the rest of your life? They f***ing jackhammer that sh*t into your skull until even I think that without a degree I'll be condemned to a life of sewing wallets in some Bangkok gulag and b***ing coal miners on weekends to make rent."

Stace grinned, "I remember those drug resistance programs, when cops would come to us in the sixth grade all the time. They'd bring kids up and put on like, the worst mini-dramas with fake prop drugs? Thanks to three years of that I've been well and truly indoctrinated in how to say 'no' to erasers and sticks of chalk."

"I remember once when the policeman brought his dog into the class and it went straight to Mrs. Marconi's desk and started barking. Best homeroom ever."

They unloaded her car and did little more than throw the sacks through the door before going back to Stace's room and doing everything the cops spent three years of homeroom visits teaching them not to do.

"Nobody's happy with what they do," mumbled Kelli over a joint. "Unless you're lucky enough to get discovered by an agent or something. I mean, would I like to be a major movie actress? Sure, but that's the kind of one-in-a-million, more-likely-to-get-struck-by-lightning jobs that you have to be realistic about, and know it's never going to happen. It's all about paying bills. Everything that people really want to do isn't worth getting paid for." Kelli reconsidered. "Unless you really like to s****, then you've probably found an easy niche in the porn industry."

Stace lounged on a beanbag chair, looking baked out of her skull. "I want to take care of animals. I always wanted to be a vet. I could be happy doing that."

"Sure, it seems cute now until someone brings their roadkilled cat into your office and you gotta give Fluffy mouth-to-mouth or something."

"Gross!"

"I think I want to be a trucker." Kelli said at last.

Even Stace brought herself out of her stoned, slouching reverie. She brought herself up on her elbow and looked at her like Kelli was insane. "A trucker?"

Kelli exhaled a thin column of smoke. "Sure. I like to drive. I like to travel. I hate people. Love eating out. And from what I hear the pay's not bad."

“,” Stacy marveled, “You don’t need a college degree to do that. Are you serious?”

“Yeah. No...” Kelli shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m just full of it. I need to get a job pretty quick to pay for my room, and it’ll probably be flipping burgers or jockeying some counter at a record store.”

“You’re not full of it,” Stace said, rolling onto her back. “But you should think about it. Gotta follow your bliss, as my mom always said. Right?”

Kelli didn’t speak, instead staring into the smoldering end of her joint for a while. She reached for the ashtray on the floor between them and crushed the end into the ceramic. “Everybody’s the hero of their own story,” she said. “But I look at my own story, and I don’t like what I see. It’s a boring story, with a boring hero. If I was watching it on screen I’d want my money back.”

Stace got up and pulled Kelli to her feet. “Come on. Enough of that stuff for you. We need to get out, meet some guys, have some drinks, go dancing. See if we can do something about boring old Kelli and get you some inspiration.”

Kelli let herself be pulled along. “I guess you can’t get hit by lightning if you don’t go outside.”

Chapter Twenty Five: Daylight

Kensal Green Cemetery

London, England

November 8, 2004 – 2:28 AM

The air grew dry in an instant. Like a valve had been turned, the rain stopped, plunging the area into a sudden crushing silence, broken only by the dripping of water from the edge of the tomb onto the grass below. Somewhere an owl hooted a question to the night and took wing away from the cemetery as fast as it could fly. And there, over the body of Quintus Artorius Dexion, three men waited.

Mordred knelt and laid a hand on his father’s back, head bowed in reverence. He closed his eyes, mumbling a prayer beseeching God for the strength to carry the power soon-to-be bestowed upon him with dignity and honor. He prayed that Dexion would find an end to his pain at last. He raised his face to the sky and opened his mouth, tasting the charged air on his tongue. He waited.

But nothing came. Cassius and Rasputin glanced at each other. “Be patient. He was old, and took many heads in his day. The power within him was considerable. No doubt the quickening will be the most profound you’ve ever experienced.”

“No...” Mordred breathed, drawing himself up to his feet, still looking up at the sky. Something felt foul, a sickness in his belly, a sting in his marrow. “Something is wrong. Can you feel it?”

Cassius opened his mouth to speak, but soon realized that he could feel something. A tremor, resounding through the stone beneath their feet. It was gentle, just tickling their bones. But it grew. They could hear more birds take flight. Dried leaves rustled on the ground. Pebbles dropped from their resting places and tumbled quietly down small inclines all around them.

"Cassius?" Mordred looked frightened. At once he felt trapped, as an ant pinned beneath the savage whim of a child with a magnifying glass. "Cassius, what's happening?"

"It's coming!" shouted Rasputin with mad glee. "Prepare your soul!"

"No," Cassius said, backing away. The tremors made their knees ache. A headstone toppled noisily to the ground somewhere in the distance. "No! We...what have we done? We should never have done this on holy ground."

"Don't be a coward! It's only superstition!" Rasputin yelled over the sounds of the earth.

Mordred started walking toward his companions, when the tremors surged. All three fell back, their knees buckling as the earth leapt. The stone split beneath Mordred's feet, and his foot became wedged, then crushed beneath two planes of rock. He screamed, unable to free himself. Cassius tried to help, but it was no use without cutting his foot off. He looked at Mordred, asking the question with his eyes.

"No, don't!" Mordred pleaded. "There has to be another way. What's happening?"

Thunder clapped so hard that the sound of it threw them all to the ground. Rasputin fell from the tomb entirely, and disappeared from sight. Cassius blinked uncertainly, his vision blurred and split. He touched his ear and felt blood trickling down his face. Mordred was speaking, but Cassius was unable to make out the words.

A wave of heat came up from the tomb, a sulfurous, disgusting pain that scalded them just to be near it. Cassius saw that Mordred had started to glow a hazy silver-blue. Energy and heat made them sweat, their teeth ached. Cassius looked up to see the sky was black, the storm clouds laced red with hellish fury.

"Help me, please!"

Cassius tried to run, but the tremors were such that he couldn't get his feet beneath him. Instead he crawled, finding himself unable to breathe the toxic, scalding air. A column of lightning fell from the sky, huge and terrible. It smote Mordred instantly, atomizing his body before he could even scream. It tore through the tomb of Arthur Quint, and it exploded in all directions.

Deaf and near-blind, Cassius realized that he didn't remember hitting the ground. His back and legs felt burned, and a glance at his hands showed horrible black char where once was skin. His own fat bubbled brown on the backs of his arms, and he realized that he was burned to the point where his nerves were destroyed and he felt no pain. The quakes had stopped, and Cassius found himself searching for the

tomb, or any sign of Rasputin or Mordred.

What he saw made his heart race with panic. The tomb was reduced to a pile of burnt stones, the biggest no larger than an apple. The ground was glossy black soil burned to a glassy sheen. Standing in the middle of it all, covered in her own blood and carrying an ancient Roman spear that still smoked with the heat of the lightning strike, was the girl Quint had brought with him. She swayed on uncertain legs, but walked towards Cassius.

He looked for his sword, and realized that he still bore it on his hip. Cassius drew it and held it in front of him to ward her off. "How is this possible? You weren't destined to become one of us! This is wrong!"

"Funny joke," she said. "A guy walks in on his wife having sex with another man. So he grabs a shotgun and blows the son of a bitch away. The wife tells him, 'ya know, if you go on like this, you won't have any friends left'." Cassius stared at her dumbly. Kelli shrugged. "The look on your face reminds me of that one, that's all."

"Put that away, girl," Cassius sneered. "You don't want to fight me."

"Yeah. Yeah, I really do."

The Roman surprised her by springing forward to attack, thrusting forward with his long blade which Kelli parried barely in time. She felt a moment of panic when she realized she'd never used any kind of weapon before in her life, but it soon vanished as Cassius pressed the fight. She found that instinct guided her arms, unheard voices that urged on her motions. It was eerie, but she trusted it. But Cassius was coming on strong, exercising his advantage in strength. He nearly knocked the spear from her grasp, and Kelli found herself retreating back into the ruins of Quint's tomb.

The boxes containing the old treasures and relics stood covered in soot and rubble. She leapt back over one and ducked low, pushing her spear for the man's gut. He swatted it away with his sword, the steel ringing low from the old wooden shaft. Kelli wondered how the weapon was able to withstand this abuse at all, even more than she marveled at how she was able to use it.

Kelli stood on one of the low crates that looked like a long casket to try and seize some kind of height advantage, but Cassius swung for her legs, and dropkicked the crate away when she leapt to dodge the blow. She landed awkwardly on her ankle and fell backwards over the crate. Cassius grunted, eyes wild with bloodlust and sent his sword arcing down to split her head in two. Kelli raised the spear over her face to block the attack. The sword wedged itself into the wood and stuck there. Cassius dropped to one knee, using his weight to press the blade down towards her. He gritted his teeth, using all his strength to overpower her. The blade dipped down towards her throat.

"Stupid bitch," Cassius sneered, "I'm a hundred times your age and killed men you've only seen in movies. Dexion taught me everything I know."

Kelli shifted to the side, releasing one hand from the spear. The sword slid down into the soil, but

Cassius was quick to recover it. She grabbed up her flashlight from where she'd dropped it and turned it on, directing the beam of light squarely into the Roman's eyes. Cassius hissed, suddenly blinded by the intense glare. His stroke fell astray. Kelli lashed out with the flashlight, smashing the dense aluminum tool into the man's jaw. Teeth and blood sprayed from his mouth, and he dropped his sword to clutch in horror at the ruins of his face.

Kelli hit him again, this time in the side of the head. And again. And again. She hammered his skull until she'd caved it into a valley, sticky with brains and hair. Cassius' hand twitched feebly for his sword. She took it away and hacked his head off with three wild strokes at his throat.

A gun cocked behind her. Kelli dropped the sword and stood to face the gunman. There stood the man in soiled furs called Rasputin, wearing a conical fur cap, now burnt and full of holes. His spectacles were shattered, the frames bent awkwardly over his nose. "The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone," mused the old madman. "Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer breast. Such a pretty abomination, I almost wish I didn't have to—"

Rasputin's chest burst red as a shot rang out. He stumbled forward, putting his hand to the fresh wound. He turned around so that he might see his attacker, only to be hit twice more. Kelli could not see the gunman either, but she didn't trust that the bullets would put the monster down. She grabbed up her spear and threw it. The point ripped through Rasputin's breastbone and punched through his body. The Immortal man lurched, the pistol dropping from his numb grasp until he fell against a stone crucifix.

"Did yeh ever think the f***er was ever goin' ta shut up?" said Jack Donahl, who stepped out from behind a tall headstone topped with a statue of a trumpeting cherubim. He kept his gun trained on Rasputin as Kelli rushed to join him. "Quint?"

Kelli shook her head, setting her jaw firm to keep from crying now. She would let it out later, away from Jack, away from everyone.

"Are you all right, lass?"

"I don't know," she admitted, "But I think Quint's all right now. He's...he's finally at peace. And I think I finally know what to do with my life. For the first time."

Rasputin vomited blood. He tried to claw his way back to his gun, but he couldn't drag himself free of the cross-beam of the crucifix he was splayed over. "This isn't right," he moaned, "This isn't what I'd envisioned. You aren't the one I wrote to end this story..."

Kelli cut his head down into the lawn. "I always liked surprise endings."

The lightning struck again, this time into the sword Kelli bore in her hand. It lifted her up by the blade, helpless as power surged through the weapon, through her arm, charging through her body. Fire coursed up from the earth and consumed the bodies of Cassius and Rasputin, forming a circle of white flame around her. Leaves spun at her feet, caught up in an invisible column of wind that soon rose to

engulf her, as though she were being taken into nature's bosom to protect her from the heat. Donahl covered his ears and hid, unable to tear his eyes away from the awesome forces at work that fueled the girl with divine power.

Kelli plummeted to the ground, unconscious. The sword tumbled away from her grip. Donahl scurried to her side and brushed the hair away from her face. "My God," he whispered, "it's a miracle." Kelli groaned, her voice weak, "Didn't know you were a religious guy, Jack."

"Might have to start goin' ta church now. Can you walk?"

They went back to Kelli's rental car, where Donahl let her sit and recover. He looked down the road and saw the woods lit with the flashing blue, lights of oncoming police cars.

"Kelli, you need to drive away from here. I have to stay."

"What? Why?"

"I have a promise to keep, lass. Don't know if you'll ever see me again, but I'll do my best to make sure whatever was left behind in that tomb is kept safe for you somewhere. Oi think the Watchers are going to have to make some major changes if they want my silence about this. I'll make this part of the price of that silence. At the least I'll send a letter to your flat back in Seattle."

"Thanks, Jack," she reached up to hug the old Irishman. "Somehow I don't think there's a prison built that could contain a tricky old fart like you, but in case I don't see you...well, take care of yourself."

"And you, lass. Good luck out there. Ain't gonna be easy for yeh."

"I know."

Donahl closed the door. "Go on, now."

Kelli went a half-mile before realizing she was on the wrong side of the road. She drove until she saw the first rays of the sun creeping over the horizon, where she pulled over to sit and watch the sun rise. There she stayed, crying until she fell asleep on the gentle grassy slope. When she awoke, there was no sign of rain, nor clouds, nor misery. There was only daylight and the day ahead. And the light felt good.

Epilogue: May It Be

University Christian Church

Seattle, Washington

October 22, 2005 – 11:30 PM

"That was some of the worst singing I think I've ever heard. Honestly."

Watching this, Brian wondered whether or not it was worth buying the complete series DVD. It didn't have the same impact when he already knew who won. So much of it just seemed like stall tactics. His finger punched the chapter-skip key again.

A knock came at the front door, making Reverend Brian Forster almost leap out of his skin. He turned the television down, wondering if he'd just been imagining things, but the knock came again after a few seconds. Then he realized what day it was and rushed down the stairs, scrubbing at his mouth with a napkin and dusting snack remnants off his shirt. Quint kept cutting it close; he'd almost missed his appointment again.

He opened the door and was surprised to see a young woman there. She wore a heavy coat with a hood, which she pulled down when she saw the minister. She had short, unbound black hair, streaked with purple like the kids seemed to enjoy for some unfathomable reason. She wore thick, almost raccoonlike eyeliner that made her look ghostly in the streetlight.

"Hello," he said, unable to come up with anything else in his startled frame of mind. He smiled at her. "I'm sorry, I was expecting someone else. Is there something wrong?"

"Hi. I know it's late, but this is important. Dex Quint sent me," she said.

"Oh?"

"He wanted me to thank you for all your help, and keeping the church open for him on this night every year. But he won't be coming back. He sent me to tell you that, and to give you this." She extended her hand, holding a simple brown cardboard box bound with a slim red ribbon.

Brian took it with a trembling hand. "He's dead, isn't he? When I got his letter, I knew that he was serious. When I was a kid, there was a fire, and he pulled me out. Ran through the fire, just like it wasn't even there. No other man would have, or could have done that. I just expected to see him again, just like every other year, and—" he broke off, tears welling in his eyes.

The girl seemed distracted for a moment, as if listening to a voice in her ear. Then she grinned. "He says to cook up a bag of pizza rolls and not to worry about him. Open it."

Brian pulled the ribbon off and slid his finger under the edge of the box. He opened the lid and saw that the box contained only a battered and burned hunk of wood. He upended the box, emptying the thing into his hand and examined it. It looked vaguely like a cup, scarred with fire and age. It was small, and looked worthless.

"What is this?" he showed her the thing with an incredulous quirk of his eyebrows.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Brian nodded.

The girl drew close, covering her mouth with her hand so that anyone who might be passing by on the street couldn't read her lips. "Magic."

Brian laughed at the girl's mysterious smile. She started to turn back to the road. "Hey, do you want to come inside? Maybe you could tell me..."

She shook her head. "I have to be somewhere. Don't dwell on the past. What's important is what we do today."

Brian waved at her. "Bye."

She returned his wave and pulled the hood back over her head. She turned and strolled down the sidewalk, soon blending into the living, breathing city and shrinking out of sight.

Brian chuckled briefly and brought his attention back to Quint's strange gift. He walked back inside and closed the door behind him, still pondering the meaning of it. He finally decided it might be a decent set piece for a communion ceremony, and went back to his room to watch the last of his television show. He'd see if he could clean it up in the morning.